The Tower

The Tower

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Acknowledgements

The editor would like to acknowledge the wonderful support of the best *Tower* staff ever. With neither pay nor complaint they performed numerous drudgeries. Each person contributed in their own way, but more importantly, each argued, pleaded, fussed, fought, cajoled, and generally contributed to the integrity of the *Tower*—without regard to personal safety from other staff members. Yvette Yeh deserves special thanks for doing the work of the art editor though she had no obligation to do so. Dan Childress graciously provided his apartment as a meeting place. All of the staff worked in several areas, but the notes beside the staff members names indicate those who made a big contribution in one particular part of producing the *Tower*. Mr. Bill Plott and the rest of the staff and advisers of the Student Publications Board helped make smooth what would otherwise have been a rocky road. Mr. Richard Dendy provided help with the art layout. Thanks must also go to the judges for making time in their busy schedules to select the prize-winning entries. And finally, Craig Stroud deserves a note of thanks for doing some of the staff work—just to be helpful. This editor cannot end this small chance to talk without saying that: 1) We do not want to hear any more about **that** poem, Dan. It made it. 2) Kathy and I still think the story should have been called *Paul's Pig Noises*.

On the Cover: Southern Arts for Existentialists Under Crisis by James Cormier

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This edition of the *Tower* is—with great pleasure and respect—dedicated to Mrs. Sarah G. Palmer. She threatened to retire for several years, but could not bring herself to do so until now. Those of us who benefited from the last several of her fifty years of teaching cannot thank her enough for staying as long as she did—even if she will look over our shoulders—every time we write—for the rest of our lives. This year, the *Tower* is a small honor given to a great teacher and a wonderful lady.

The Serenade of a Son

by

Lionel S. S. Wong

The joss-sticks had fallen
the incense had passed,
The figure standing
alone at last.
The Crown Prince contemplates
the fate of his father
Who lies waiting
for the Angel's coming.

The Imperial Guard saluted
as he passes,
The Jade Gate parted
without a question.
The Forbidden City has a disturbing aura
as if crying for the dying Monarch.
The Crown Prince hurried
through the corridors and arches,
As the Son of Heaven
is waiting for his presence.

As the Prince enters
the Dragon's Bay,
He sees his father
on the Winter's Bed,
The Mongol Emperor looks so grey
the golden sparkle had escaped from his face,
His features contrived in a distorted pain
The fire had flown from his Majestic days.

The Prince remembered
the times that were,
Where together they rode
Their fancies gallop.
The Father and Son
like the Yin and Yang,
fighting and challenging
against Kings of Men.

Of the West Wind blowing
as they crossed the plains,
And Red hawks hovering
Over the Men of Zen.
Across the Steppes
Battling the Nomads,
Subduing their Barons
in the Year of the Dragons.
Onwards and outwards
the Emperor and Prince,
Europe is waiting
Asia is shaking,
Into India, against Maharajah's
Into Russia, against the Czar's
Into China, against the Warlord's
Into Persia, against Alexander's

Outside there came
the sound of a flute,
The lonely notes flowed
into the Dragon's abode,
The Music touched
the souls of the room,
The tune so sad
it obscened their world.
The Emperor could see
the Creator beckoning,
For the last time he reached
for the hand of the Prince,
The sad Warrior seized
by his father's demise,
only Memories
the journeys they had been.

Reverse the Battle by

by

Paul Schattel

Reverse the battle by
staring
in the face
the devil drives
I care

Struggle on a two lane blacktop.
My desire wears a well cut flattop.
West Blocton whizzes by.
Open the pod bay doors, Hal.

Don't look through me
and
I won't look through you.

The moon is full tonight
and now
I feel
like howling.
Open the pod bay doors, Hal.

Don't look through me
and I promise
I won't look through you.

gone gone
my girl's all gone
I looked her in the eye and she looked all wrong
she put on her jacket and she sang me a song
"Git along little doggie, git along, git along."

To a Spotted Dog

by

Jerri Buckingham

Our truck raised seas of dust
Approaching near a dump,
One of those truants
Along some lone dirt road
Where convenience lures
The less industrious
To discard life's modern
Fringe benefits—trash.
He must have raised
His white, black-eared face
As he heard us,
Because he stood with the air
Of one interrupted
In some consuming task.
His white sides thin
With lattice-work ribs
Where the black spots
Of his fur
Strangely resembled craters,
As he stood,
Back bowed,
Nose up,
And searched the air
For some clue
Of the mercy or malice
We bore.
We slowed,
And a clamor of barking
Arose
From the bed of our truck,
Our own spoiled pets,
And to stop, now,
Here,
May surely bring doom,
However misintended.
The spotted dog stood,
In the trash,
By the road,
And the tip of his tail
Flipped-twitched, side to side
As a silent slight plea
Or a shy quiet smile.
I thought that the dog
And myself
Were the same,
Misplaced by some master,
Forgotten by name,
So I stand on my trash heap
And wag sometimes shyly
Trying to make sense
Of the world passing by.

Dedicated to Alan Strang

by

Craig Stroud

There is a man inside every horse
Struggling among fleshy tensions,
Twitches, and jerks, to spring forth
From Michelangelo's block of marble.
He can be felt as the hand caresses
The heady fur.
The hide relaxes,
And each valley of muscle
Tenses to fullness to
Receive each religious finger.

The massive head turns to one side,
and a belladonna eye stares back
With a contained immensity.
Trapped in the flesh,
And that being the only way free.
The horse's eyes suggest
His desire for freedom from the flesh,
To be a man.
Man often suggests in his eyes
The freedom of desire for the flesh,
To be a horse.

To break the flesh to be man or horse,
Never satisfied with what is now.
Breaking the flesh is ecstasy,
Whether with the Whip or the Blade.
And the essence that issues forth
Breeds centaurs.

21 miles to albany

by

Craig Stroud

Auctioneers sell children
who will never live in trailers
or play
next to colored swingsets
next to colored chickens
next to colored children
laundry piles
and pie pans
4-H kids farm next to sheriff's ranch
milking goats
milking cows
milky nose
tears falling among okra seeds
while nitrogen nurtures no one's needs
move on
piled
in green pickups
21 miles to albany
auto part landscape
defies hungry school busses

Pillow Head

by

Craig Stroud

My baby said that I had nice hair
As she twisted it around her fingers.
I found a job and she left me.
But before she grabbed her purse,
I said "here,"
And looked at my hands.
She took the pillow I had made,
And said that the war had made me shaved,
And that I was a slave.
The hair was entwined
Around the other hair,
And hair was stuffed inside.
And each night,
While my ex-baby slept,
Her cheesecake cheeks pressed against the side of my head.

The Reaper

by

A.K. Pond

Eyes void of emotion watch me,
  their queen
A smile flickers about my lips
As I gaze at My subjects.
Subjects of My kingdom.
A kingdom of purple and white-
regal and cold.
  We sit,
backs against the world;

But the world creeps in,
immigrants join the masses,
sweeping across the world
and enveloping people.
Little children wilt and die.
  We watch—
silently, impassively,
and commence our journey.

People fall in our path,
we crash right over them,
ignoring their screams.
We march past the ill,
trample the maimed,
and nothing stops My kingdom.

In My kingdom
of purple and white-
regal and cold,
emotions are outlawed,
compassion is foreign.
my kingdom is empty
and bleak.
I am the queen
  and sit,
back against the world.

"Light is the first of painters"
Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Portrait

by

LeAnn McNew

This morning the sun propped up
His easel and began to paint.
He said, "Today I will paint so perfectly
Everyone will stop to admire my work."
He dipped his brush into the light
And smeared color across the sky.
Turning to the landscape, he applied
Shades of green and pale amber.
A few people paused to admire
The portrait but not quite enough.
Disappointed. He dipped his brush in
The dark and began to paint. . .

drip drip

by

Tena Scalph

drip drip
dim smell
blue tongue
love head
crouch
cower
crawl away
crawl away
drip drip
thump death
gone today
sun red
ceiling dead
light stabs
corners
crevices
crawl away
crawl away
crawl away

this is sex with you.

i feel soft

by

Tena Scalph

i feel soft
like a snow-pillow
fluff in my head
pumping air in my
flat heart.
you give me a smile
and i take it.
you give me your love
and I fake it.

your ghost drifts close

by

Tena Scalph

your ghost drifts close
breezing through my crucified mind
i am nailed to your tenderness
stuck to your love like gum,
as your thread thin daytime
props up my setting sun
i am ready, i am wrapped
i am Christmas for something
and i am expecting nothing.

Sink Possession

by

Cheryl Graffo

Help! There's a demon in my sink!
I can hear him whispering
I think --
Or is it just
Water gurgling
Over rust
Coated pipes?
He talks all night
But no sight
Of him do I catch
I know he's there, though
Because he stole my cat
And my forty-dollar hat
I wish he'd go
And possess someone else's sink
I can't get a drink
Or wash my face
Because he inhabits the place
If he'd just leave me in peace
I'd gladly let him keep
My cat
And my forty dollar hat.

The Channel Eight Four-Door News Wagon

by

Jon Martin

Endless highway gives birth to danger
Hypnotic miles pass like kidney stones
When suddenly metal meets metal
With man the victim

Thus forms a clot in the rush hour vein
Those late for work curse those who lie bleeding
And now for the live report...

The Last Fencepost

by

Steven A. Mitchell

I went home and found
That they'd torn down the last fencepost
Progress came in the shape of a bulldozer and a bonfire.

Why should progress care,
To see the post stand alone
In the grass-covered ditch that drains the pond?

For someday progress will require
That they build a new fence
On metal posts, that rust.

We put that post up
Off the bed of a '59 Chevy
During the summer of '72
When I was five
And he was . . .
Never mind.
They are only numbers.

He looked like a wooden fence post, slim, rugged,
Gaunt; with character and individuality in the sunshine,
Saying, "It's hot. Maybe we should go."

He told my dad that he'd rather die than attempt
Again, to give up smoking.
No wonder he couldn't answer the pleas of a five year old boy.

We lifted the hole diggers on the truck
And coughing, he drove to the hospital, almost,
With the cigarette hanging from his mouth.

The post stayed there,
On top of Sand Mountain
Withstanding lightning and wind
Oblivious to the changes occurring around him.

Driving away,
I glanced back and saw a cigarette
Clenched between the barbed-wire teeth of the mountain.

Its smoke mingled with the dust of progress,
Hiding the true nature from everyone except those who were close
And initiated.

The mountain looked at me, at my leaving,
But no tears came down the gullies in that face.
A world in transition can be a cruel place.

I left because I didn't fit. I still don't.
There, they don't care much for words.
Here, they don't care much for anything else.
Inside, I knew it was inevitable.
But occasionally, in both worlds,
I find someone who still understands
And remembers fenceposts.

Summary of Summer '88
(The Summer of Love's Denial)
by
Dan Mazikowski

Another Summer waves goodbye
From dark recesses in my brain
Another Summer floated by
And seemed to float right down the drain
A Summer of Love, I thought it would be
but now it's time for my critique
I hear Love calling behind a tree
In a vicious game of hide and seek
There's no telling how long this poem could run
With so many songs that remain to be sung
And so many things that we've done and undone
But remember, there's nothing new under the sun
Like surgeons who pick at a festering scar
We look back on pits of primordial tar
And we have to admit that we haven't come far
So let's just admit to ourselves what we are

We are the Runners, the Runners from Love
And in all our running we push and we shove
And by all our shoving we stumble and fall
Like lemmings we answer the Suicide Call
We run from plateaus into valleys of death
We run by our will though we can't catch our breath
We run from the Truth and we run from the Light
We bow to our idols and cling to our fright
We run from the Promise that comes from on high
We run from all those who would look through our eyes
We run from the offer too good to be true
We run from the Bond that makes one out of two
Who do we run to? we run to the Germs
We run to the Killers, we run to the Worms
With wide open arms and wide open legs
We run to the Cauldren and sink to the dregs

We have to admit that we haven't come far
So let's just admit to ourselves what we are

We are the Killers, the Killers of Love
We sneer as we dissect a pure, spotless Dove
We mingle the blood with our concrete presumption
And offer it up to the god of consumption
Our self-conjured theories are nothing but nooses
When love goes no further than bodily juices
Don't say that I'm crazy, for all are insane
At one point or another we all become vain
We kill our Redemption with trust in the world
And into a darkness our spirits are hurled
If darkness is the only light that we see
How dark, then, the darkness that blinds you and me!
We kill one another with lust and device
We think we're in charge but we'd better think twice
We say "peace and safety," we say "it's alright"
And doom comes upon us like thieves in the night

We have to admit that we haven't come far
So let's just admit to ourselves what we are

We are the Murd'rers, the Murd'rers of Love
We see the Big Picture but don't know what it's of
We murder our friendships with holes of dissent
And sewing on patches worsens the rent
We treat misconceptions as if they were true
And stick to our doctrines like flies stick to glue
We swim in our egos and drown by ourselves
Unbearable Lightness collapses our shelves
We murder our partners with knives made of lust
We murder our balance, and that murders trust
The strongest-cast iron just rots into rust
When we sweep Monogamy up with the dust
All our loveless copulations
Are only ego masturbations
Our cisterns are shattered when grasped by the fool
Our blood is lapped up by the tongues of the cruel

All these things are rumbling clouds
That darken all our sunlit skies
And all the pain that wears us down
Is acid rain that burns our eyes
And as for me, I'm just like any other
Rudely ripped forth from the womb of his mother
And in my discussion you may hear me say
How often I wish I could get far away

To get far away from the evils around us
From promised deliverance that only confounds us
From the nodding agreement of ignorant heads
From the chemical compounds with which we are fed
From separate classes by color of skin
From those who say natural process is sin
From people confronted with Truth who won't hear it
From bodies who boast in defiance of spirit
From jewels of gold in the noses of swine
From "I'll scratch your back only if you scratch mine"
From presidents, bishops, popes, and queens
From army, navy, air force, marines
From he who bears gifts with intent to seduce
From love=duty and sex=use
From ravenous wolves with blood on their breath
From honey-tongued women whose steps lead to death
From officials who won't let you build your own house
From bigots who won't let you pick your own spouse
From systems of caste and nobility titles
From lost souls who bow down and pray to their idols
From minds that won't see things for what they are worth
From "progress" that leeches the life from the earth
From the hearts of the heartless, the bite of the cold
From the Church of the Living Eternal Billfold
From cities and all of their subsequent mire
From rhetoric preaching brimstone and hellfire
From region and district and country and nation
From all of this damned televangelization
From the gun and the club and the bomb and the knife
From the women who waltz in and out of my life
From the folks who use God to buy a new car
From the folks who throw stones at God from afar
From all these true evils, from all this true sin
And all other nooses we hang ourselves in

But to face it is learning, to run is to die
And smug denial is a plank in the eye
And sitting around with your head in your hands
Is sitting alone with your head in the sand
The world around us, built by we
Is not all it's made out to be
And as we pass from zone to zone
The lives we live are not our own
The body is but just a mass
Of dust that lives but doesn't last
We have to learn by Nature's laws
Material is not our cause
So realize now as you crawl from the tar
As you creep from your mansion or fall from your bar
Look back and see as you grope for your Star
How foolish we all really are.

How foolish we all really are.

Decades to Come, and Yesterday

by

Christopher J. Parker

We were young and impetuous,
Full of Life
And Love
And Love of Life.
And We were beautiful for it.

We shared our hopes and dreams,
That spring of 1987,
And our fears.
We aspired and succeeded,
And more often failed,
Or thought we did.
But we each had the others,
And in them found solace, comfort
And care.
We were happy.

There was magic
That spring.
It was real then, part of life itself,
And there were things around us
Full of mystery and adventure,
And these we shared, too.

But time passes, the memories grow dim,
Even now, my hand fails me,
The words no longer flow.
And those bonds, forged so strong—
We thought them perfect and impervious
And immutable—
Even so begin to strain and weaken
Perhaps die.
It is a sad thing and a sad time,
A time to lament and to mourn,
To howl in the darkness
Alone.

Nay, no longer!
Weep no longer
For there is no stronger bond
Than Love shared in the
Embrace of companionship
And even time and distance
Cannot hope to crack the True Links.
For even though we embark on divergent courses
To brave The Uncertain Future and perhaps
Not to return,
We did have the Spring
And Fun and Laughter
And Tears;
And, though we may become separated
By gulfs and chasms and walls
Of stone and void,
This fact cannot change.

So sing and dance and rejoice!
As we did long ago.
I'll strum the lyre and chant the incantation
And perhaps catch a glimpse
Of a fleeting elf in the wood.
And remember them,
The names they were named
And those they created:

Jeffrey Jerome Francis, the Animalism,
The Loud and Proud
And Noble;

And James the genuine Spark and
Brilliance, the Flame that Burnt
So Fast and Bright whom we chance to know
And wished to know better,
But could not;

And Dana the Huntress,
The Ruthless and the Tender
Whom we tamed with hugs
(Or was it she who tamed us?);

Linda, Officer of the Fleet of Stars
And Maiden of the Wood,
Beautifully Armored LB
Whose radiance blinded he
Who would more than glimpse;

Timothy, both Knight and Dragon
Doomed to battle himself
(As we all are)
Our Champion Dreamer, given a "Y" for his name
Because, yes, he, too, was special;

Mike, whom we called Mikey
To remind us that inside the
Barbarian Protector there dwelt
A child as well as a man—
The Talented, The Fun;

And Carol, Our Fragile Light,
Who protected us although she was
No match for the battle,
Showed us the way
Though she could not always see it herself,
Cared for us and loved us,
And she it was who helped us
Love ourselves,
La Chica,
Elvish Princess;

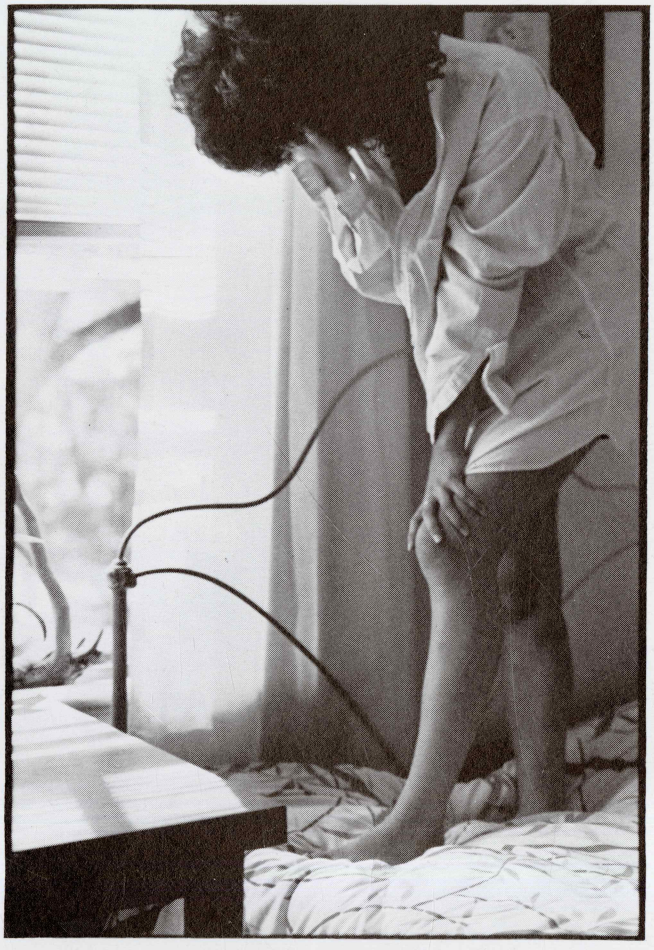
And Christopher of the many names,
He Who Hugs,
Chris who loves not wisely, but too well,
Ceej who is ready for the Hunt
And the Fight and the Challenge,
Christovar the Soul that Cried, Kistoffar
Who reached and strained and over-reached
And fell-but was caught and saved
And Loved--
The One Who Rattled On and On
And on . . .

Sing the Names of these and
Others, too many others
And Remember
Always
The Spring.

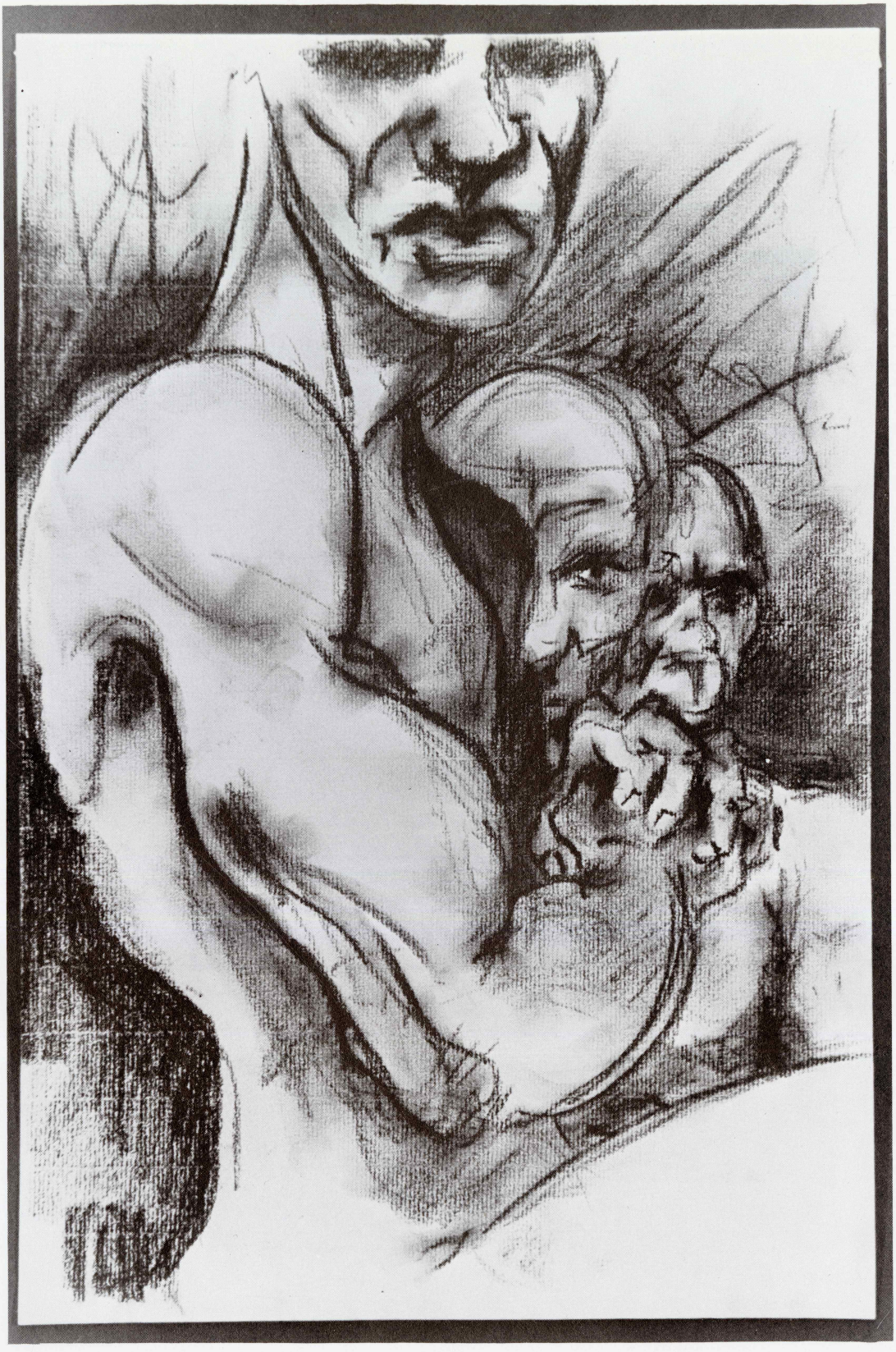
Dan Mazikowski Yin & Yang

Yvette Yeh

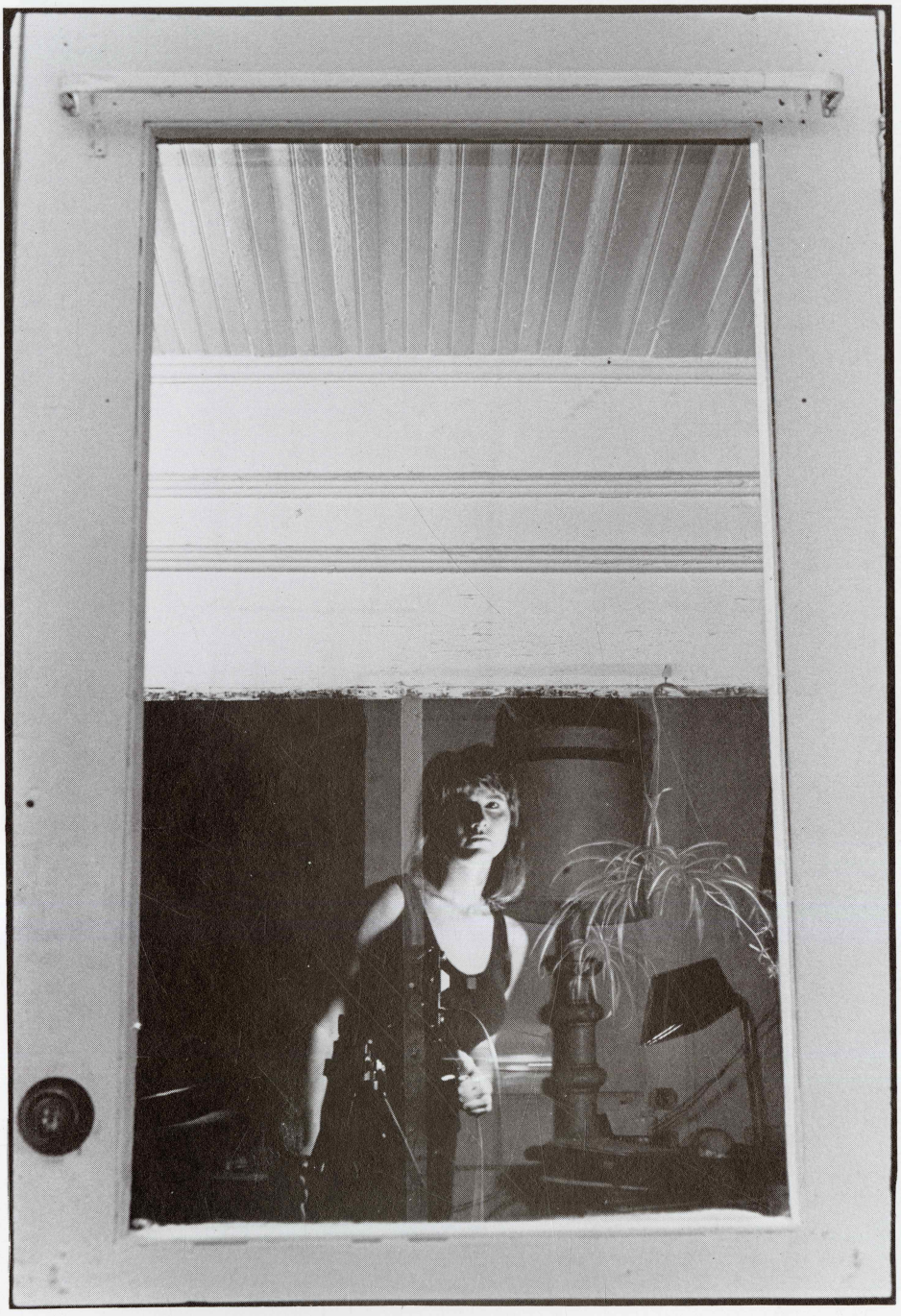
Yvette Yeh



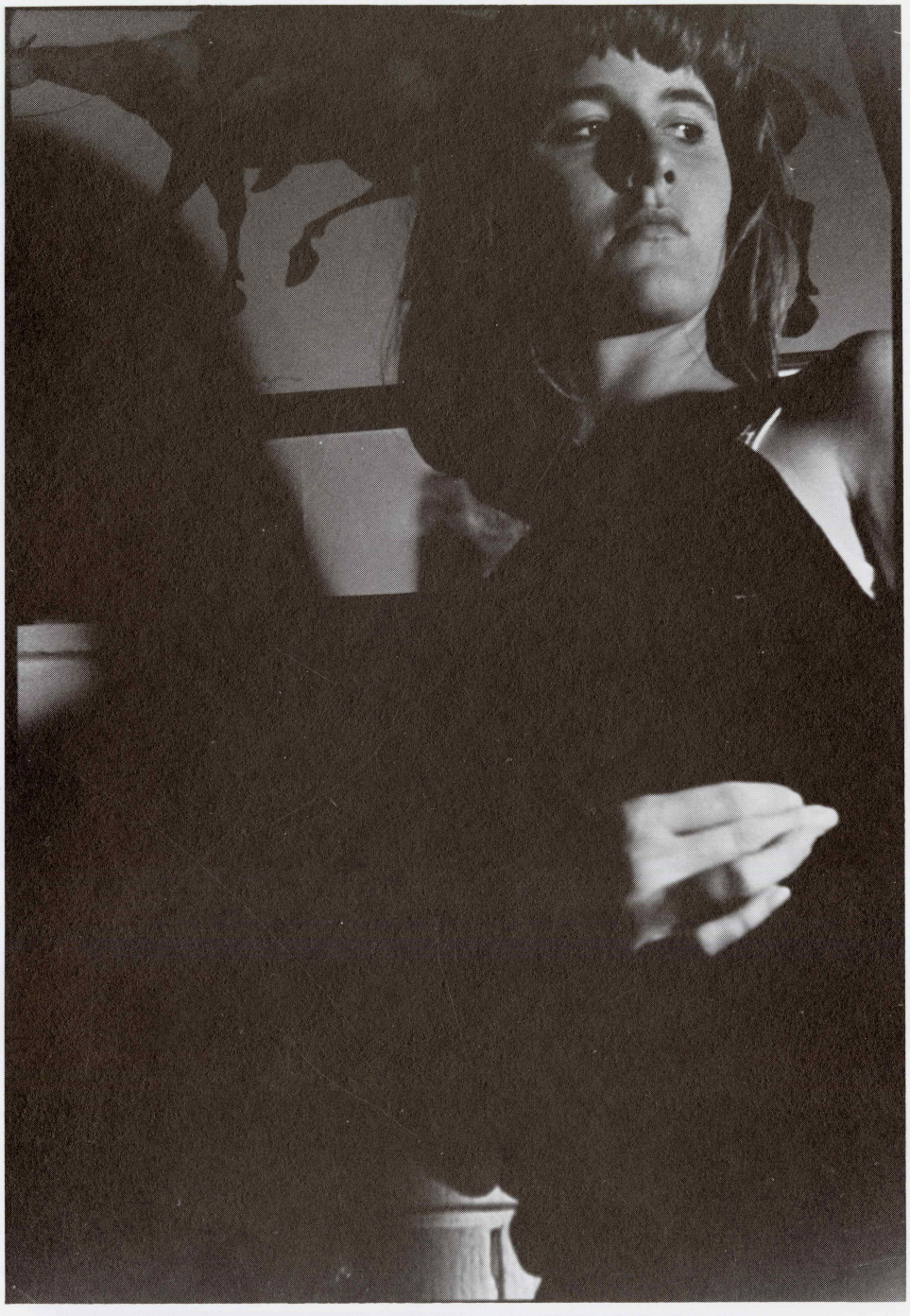
Yvette Yeh



Ricky Atkins



Katy Curtis



Katy Curtis

Katy Curtis

James Cormier Hoggly Woggly Fine Meats

Denise McGriff Me Thru My Eyes

Dwain Alford Bovine Ruminations

Todd
by
Chris Chapman

"Todd? Todd, honey? Rise and shine." I opened my eyes to see my mother's face peeking in the bedroom door. I had just been dreaming, but the more I tried to remember my dream, the more I seemed to forget it. "Todd, I've got to be going now, but I left your lunch money on the table and your breakfast in the microwave," she said as she shut my door. I waited until she was gone and the apartment was quiet before I got up.

I took a shower and came back to my room to get dressed. I took Jimmy, my best friend, out of the closest. Jimmy is a light blue, short sleeve shirt with "Shereton" stitched across the back and "Jimmy" stitched over the front pocket. Jimmy used to be friends with my grandfather, who was also named Jimmy. I never knew my grandfather (he died before I was born), but Jimmy tells me stories about him. I put Jimmy on and buttoned him up. My mother told me not to wear Jimmy to school, but she doesn't understand how close we are. He's always been there when I needed him and I want to be around when he needs me.

I went to the kitchen to eat. I got my eggs and pancakes out of the microwave and set them on the table next to a box of dishes. There was a note on the table. "Todd, Good luck. Don't worry, I know you'll meet plenty of nice boys and girls to be friends with. Love, Mother." I wasn't too worried about school, I guess. I finished my breakfast, brushed my teeth, and drove to my new school.

Homeroom wasn't too bad. A lot of people were staring at Jimmy, but I told him not to worry and he relaxed, knowing I understood. Homeroom was only a few minutes long. When I got to first period, English, I sat in the back corner. Everyone was talking because they already knew each other. I waited for roll call and then turned invisible. I learned how to turn invisible a few years ago. All I have to do is think about it and pull on my earlobe. I become invisible and don't have to worry about anyone bothering me. I sat there quietly as the teacher began to talk about Shakespeare.

Suddenly, I remembered the dream I was having this morning. It was about Othello; the game, not the play. If you've never played Othello, the rules are simple. If your opponent puts her black chip next to your white chip, you can put a white chip on the opposite side of her chip to surround it. When you surround a chip, you turn it over so its the same color as your other chips and it becomes your chip. Well, in my dream, I was playing a giant game of Othello with real people; girls against boys. When a boy was surrounded, he became a girl. In the end, I was the only boy left. I was standing there. . .

"Hey."

. . .in the middle of all these girls. They were all facing me, but none of them were looking at me. I wanted to escape, but I couldn't. Then my mother woke me. . .

"Hey, isn't your name Todd?"

I realized someone was talking to me. I looked at the girl beside me. "What?" I said to her.

"You answered to 'Todd' at roll."

My mind was racing faster than I could keep up. How had she seen me?! Why was she talking to me?! Why was she looking at me?! I thought I'd better say something, so I said "Yeah."

"They why does your shirt say 'Jimmy' on it?"

"That's his name," I told her.

She started laughing. Then she held out her hand to me and said "Well, it's nice meeting you both, Todd and Jimmy. My name's Kathy."

I looked at her hand, confused. I looked back up to her face and asked "What . . .uh . . .," but couldn't think of what exactly I wanted to ask. She laughed some more and lowered her outstretched hand.

As I watched her laugh, I realized, quite suddenly, that I was smiling.

My Friend Mark
by
Chris Chapman

Sometimes my friend can be a real jerk.

Mark's been my friend for about four years. He was about the first friend I made when I moved here. We get along pretty good and I guess we're fairly close, but sometimes he starts telling me what to do and what not to do. He's done it to me several times before, but this latest time was probably the last straw.

The first time I remember him acting like I was doing something stupid was a while back when I started hanging around the fish market. Mark and I went out one afternoon to buy some new shirts. We both picked out some nice shirts and went to pay for them. All of my shirts were blue. My friend stopped me before we bought them and tried to talk me out of buying these shirts. He knows that the people at the fish market always wore blue shirts and he said that I was just getting all those blue shirts because they had them. Well, I let him know that really liked blue shirts and that he couldn't tell me what to do, and bought the shirts.

Soon after that, I quit hanging around the fish market people and got tired of my blue shirts, and started hanging out with the people at the flower shop. They all had their fingernails and toenails painted different colors. One day I told Mark that I was going to get my nails painted different colors. He asked me why I wanted to and I told him because I just wanted to and I had thought about it for a while, and... well, I really didn't owe him an explanation. So I went ahead and got my fingernails and toenails painted.

A few months after that (I had stopped hanging around the flower shop people and had scraped the paint off my nails), I started hanging out with the cows in Farmer Nelson's field. All of these cows have a big N branded on their ass, so of course when I told Mark that I was going to get a big N branded on my ass, he just assumed that it was because my cow friends also had their asses branded. I liked it. Also, I had been thinking of having a big N branded on my ass for some time now. He tried to talk me out of it, but he's not my parents, so I got that big N branded on my ass with or without his permission.

Well that was about a year ago. I don't worry about the big N on my ass very much because no one hardly ever sees my ass anyway. Besides, if someone were to judge me just because I had my ass branded, they're not worth worrying about anyway.

Well lately, I've been making friends with the one-armed men at the hat shop. They've all had their arms taken off because of an accident or a war or something, but I didn't judge them because they only had one arm. My friend Mark also *claims* not to judge people because of their looks or race or religion or sexual preference, but when I told him that I was going to get my arm removed, *BOY* did he try to stop me!!! He just didn't understand that I've really given this some thought and I really want my arm removed! And I'm *not* doing it just to be like my friends at the hat shop. I want my arm removed for my own reasons!!

This time, however, he went over the line. He came into the hat shop and, right in front of the one-armed men, he tried to talk me out of it! I'm surprised at how much of a square he can be at times. I was really embarrassed and I told him I couldn't understand why he was being such an asshole about this. He finally gave up and left. He was pretty mad.

Anyway, I'm going to have my arm removed this afternoon. After today, I'll have only one arm... and if he judges me just because I'm handicapped, then he's just not worth worrying about.

Adolf, The Oklahoma Man

by

Carol Dearing

It was a hot, hot summer day. The kind where everyone walks around real slow and lets their eyelids fall halfway shut. It was finally suppertime and the sweet smell of herb rice seeped through the screen door onto the porch where we sat. Daddy puffed on his worn gray pipe, and Harlen, who just turned seventeen, sucked on his cigarettes proudly, considering himself much older now that he was smoking with adults instead of sneaking of and coming back trailing the scent of a Lucky Strike. Bonny crouched over her dirty rag dolls with their yellow and red matted hair. Her skinny hands and dirty fingernails moved around the wooded chairs and broken round table that Santa had brought her. Her tiny alto voice sang around us as she used different pitches for each doll. Kinny and I sat on the wooden steps, letting our scarred knees and skinny legs dangle. The dirt between our toes and the fine coat of dust left our feet looking brown and foreign, like the little half-naked boys I'd seen in *National Geographic* at school.

Momma turned on the Sears Roebuck Silvertone radio with stereo speakers, but the speakers were now just the right speaker. When we first got it, Daddy read out of the manual about stuff that we didn't understand, like electromagnetic waves and the amplitude modulation. She tuned it to WKLO, and we silently listened to Thermal Castleban strum his three chords and sing about women, wars, and getting drunk off homemade whisky. The sound of bare, raw chicken hitting hot fat drowned out Thermal every few minutes as Momma would throw each piece in the frying pan.

Momma came out to the porch. Her face was pink and her thin, wiry hair hung out of its braid. "Here they are. It's about time."

Everyone straightened up and watched the white Cadillac as it bounced down the driveway that went around a large, overgrown pasture. The horn blew as it neared the house. Bonny stood and pulled one of her rag dolls up by its leg and let it dangle upside down, dragging its head on the dirt-stained boards of the porch smiling its painted triangle smile. Daddy stood up and stretched. "I declare! If it idn't Demi and Rube."

Demi stepped out of his car and smiled. His oversized build and bulging stomach hulked next to Rube's fragile body. Momma clunked down the stairs in her thick and outdated high-heeled shoes and hugged Rube. Daddy shook hands with Demi, and they patted each other on the back with loud thunderlike slaps. Rube carefully caressed our dirty faces in her soft white hands and kissed us on our sweaty foreheads. She scooped up Bonny and hugged her. "My! You're lookin' more and more like a little angel every day, child."

Harlen stood, pulling his jeans up and smiling.

"Harlen, you're lookin' even goofier!" Demi said as he shook his hand.

Demi's rattlesnake-skin boots banged loudly on the wood. He took in an enormous breath and let it out slowly. "Ooowee! To be home again!"

He let out a guffaw of laughter from his nose. That this large-bodied man was my brother was always such a shock; even when he lived at home, I could never believe that his bushy eyebrows and acne-scarred skin were even related to me. Momma and Rube went inside to set up for supper. Daddy and Demi sat outside with their feet up on the porch rail. They brought out green packages and put their oil-stained fingers into the waxed insides and stuck brown wads behind their back teeth. We watched, trying to absorb how they were able to do it without swallowing any or having it fall out when they talked or laughed. Harlen rolled another cigarette and held it the way Humphrey Bogart did in *The African Queen.*

Supper was long, and Demi loudly told jokes, while Rube smiled, her blue eyes glowing. We laughed at Demi's jokes and giggled at Rube's smiles. After supper, everyone patted their round stomaches. Kinny mashed up his sweet potatoes so that it looked as if he had eaten them. Bonny followed Momma and Rube into the kitchen, dragging her doll and carrying her empty glass. She perched herself on top of the counter beside the sink and dried the dishes, pretending to be a grown-up in the conversation, nodding her head.

"I swar, Delilah, that chicken was better than yer sister Whit's."

Momma turned to Rube. "Whitman cooks fried chicken?"

Rube laughed. "Law, no, Delilah. That fryin' puts in that cholesterol, remember?"

They laughed. Momma swung her hands in the air, flinging suds onto the ceiling and windows.

"I don't know what happened to Whit. You know, she went out to that state of California, where Charles Manson's from," she paused for a second, "came home an' has never been the same. Never."

Rube shook her head.

Kinny and I were outside catching lightning bugs when I looked up. There, in our driveway, stood a tall man wearing a navy overcoat. His dark eyes and black hair glowed in the fresh darkness and full, orange moon.

"Hey, son, Rube Slater here?"

We looked at him with surprise. Kinny pretended to act calm.

"Yeah. Who wants to know?"

Kinny put his weight on his left leg and squinted his round eyes. The man hinted at a smile, then, unable to hide his amusement, gave a full, wide smile showing a row of beautiful straight white teeth. Kinny punched me, I saw it, a large red star was tattooed on one of his front teeth.

"Run in an' git Demi," Kinney said. I was annoyed that he was telling me what to do, but I turned around toward the house.

"Hey, boy! Stop!"

I turned back around.

"I'll make my own appearance. Thank you for yer help."

He strode past us, the bottom of his coat floating behind him trying to catch up. We were silent for a minute and caught our breath, then ran off to the kitchen.

"Momma, there's this man outside and he's got a tattoo on his tooth, right here."

We were out of breath as we both stuck fingers in our mouths showing her where the tattoo was. At that moment, Demi's loud voice boomed through the house.

"Rube!"

Rube slowly dried her hands and motioned for Momma to follow. The three of us tagged along behind her. Rube stood in the hall, staring at the man, blushing a deep scarlet color. The man's face brightened when she looked at him.

"Rube, how are you?"

He smiled. Momma's face turned red when she saw the tattoo. Daddy quickly looked away trying to pretend that it wasn't there, and Harlen's mouth dropped open.

Demi clenched his fist. The purple vein in his forehead began to pop out, and he turned dark pink.

"Listen here, Rube's been doin' mighty fine in life until you got here. We've both been living' wonderful Christian lives of love, ain't that right, Rube?" He turned to Rube who was staring at the floor. Her brown hair reflected red from the naked, off-white light bulb outside on the porch. Demi pushed Rube a little.

"Rube?"

She looked up and nodded.

"So you see, you ain't welcome here, now or ever!"

He pointed to the screen door. Little insects were accumulating on it, making clicking noises as they tried to pull their little legs from the squares in the screen. Rube looked at her husband and bit her long pink nails. Bonny held her breath. Daddy rubbed his gray eyes. Usually, when his eyes turned gray, it was after a hard day when he would pull off his J.C. Penny brogans, take his six-pack of Black Label beer to the porch in a paper sack, and watch the sun set.

"Listen here, boys, I'm not too sure what's goin' on. How about we all just step out on the porch here and talk about it. I don't think we're gittin' anything done standin' here in the hall."

His voice was low and calm. Momma herded us kids into the kitchen so we couldn't hear. Harlen started to walk outside with everyone, but Momma told him he had to watch us. He clenched his teeth and hissed that he wanted to go to the porch. Momma squeezed her green eyes shut and pointed to where we stood. Harlen, in his dirty, untied boots, stomped back to where we were, making the dishes shake in the china cabinet. After he sat down at the table and lit a cigarette, we clung around him, begging him to tell us what was happening. Who was that man? Why was Demi so mad? He let smoke drift out of his nose and gave a lazy smile, enjoying being the center of attention.

"Well, 'bout ten years ago—y'all can't remember 'cause you weren't born yet, Rube and Demi got in this big fight at the BlueBoot Bar out on 92. Rube went home an' got her stuff an' left the trailer an' Demi went to Aunt Whit's house. She stayed there fer a good while an' got a job an' everything. Well, she worked fer this here guy that just showed up." Harlen's voice got soft; he leaned forward.

"Well, it seems that they got somethin' goin' fer awhile. One day, Demi heard about him runnin' a cock fightin' ring out behind his house. An' he was growin' some illegal "weeds' in his garden between his sunflowers and corn."

Harlen sat back into his chair and blew smoke rings. Kinny blew a bubble and sucked it back in, sounding like a vacuum cleaner that had just inhaled a plastic bag.

"And . . .? Go on Harlen!" Kinny said impatiently. Harlen leaned forward.

"Well, when Demi found this out, he called the police. They come out and arrested that man. Rube cried a lot, took up smokin' and stuff but then went back to Demi after that guy was sentenced to jail fer twelve, fifteen years, somethin' like that."

We sat on our knees, wondering why no one had ever told this story to us. There was silence; it was cut by thin voices on the porch, little mumbles that couldn't possibly be real words. Everyone was still and quiet, not even blinking, trying to hear the voices. Demi's voice was the loudest; he hollered so loudly that his words were the only ones that we could hear, crisp and clear.

"Listen here, Delilah, this here man has broke the law! He's in prison, fer God's sake!"

Mumble, mumble, mumble, mumble, mumble.

"Yeah? Well, if you think his even touchin' my Rube, yer wrong! Wrong!"

Mumble, mumble, mumble.

"I don't want to calm down, Rube!"

Mumble, mumble.

"I wish you could hear yerself right now, Rube! Sounds like a damn movie star with them big words!"

The screen door slammed shut. Rube ran into the kitchen where we were. Momma followed behind her.

"Now Sweetie, Demi's just upset and has every right to be."

Rube gnawed on her small, red lips. We stared at her, no one saying anything. Harlen moved the glass ashtray in circles

on the table. He pretended to be wrapped up in making perfect circles.

"Rube!" Demi shouted in a severe voice. Rube stood in front of the sink, staring out through the black window. Momma put her hand on Rube's thin shoulder. Rube sighed, turned around, gave us a weak smile, and left the room.

"Momma?"

Kinny started to ask a question that we all wanted to ask, Momma jerked her finger in front of her mouth, motioning for us to shut up. She leaned on the stove and tried to listen to what Demi was saying, and then when Demi started in on a string of words that were positively forbidden, she turned to us and pretended that she wasn't listening to him.

"Yes, Kinny, what?"

He cupped his hands around his mouth in a loud whisper, "Who is that man?" She sighed and picked up a church bulletin from the counter and fanned herself.

"Well . . .shoo! It's so hot in here."

She walked to the door and opened it. She stood in front of it, letting a breeze cool her off. The napkins on the table flew off, but no one made an effort to get up and catch them before they clung to the door, pushing to get out, and then slowly drifted back down to the floor when the wind let up.

"Well, he is an evil, sinning man. Who . . .well . . .do you children understand the word "parole"?

We nodded anxiously, knowing Bonny didn't really but wanted us to think she did.

"Well, this man is on parole from prison for doin' some bad, evil things, some that involve Aunt Rube. He really hurt her. That's why Demi is so mad, 'cause he didn't like watchin' her suffer."

Harlen spoke up. "I told 'em already what happened."

Momma turned around. "Oh. Well, anyway, Demi asked him to leave an' he won't till he speaks to Rube. Poor ole soul."

Harlen looked up.

"Who, Demi or Rube?"

Momma turned back around. "Both I guess."

She was silent for a minute. The tree frogs outside groaned low pitched sighs through the dark silhouette of trees.

"Demi never lets poor ole Rube forget what she did and, he's done a lot to hurt her, too. He thinks that whatever he does, no matter how sinful it is, will never add up to her sin. She made one mistake in her life and is doomed if she ever makes another!"

She was now getting excited and her voice was strong, like a preacher's. "Two wrongs don't make a right!" She turned around to us and pointed her finger.

"One day, there's gonna' be a banquet of consequences, and we're all gonna' sit down to it, even Demi!" She put her hands on her hips and nodded.

"Even Demi." She began to calm down. She fiddled with her cross that hung around her neck and stared off out the window again.

"What's his name, Momma? Adam?" Harlen asked, to direct the conversation back from the Bible lesson to Rube.

"Adolf, honey, not Adam."

"Oh yeah, Adolf."

Momma turned on the faucet and washed off her face. Little trickles of sweat slid down our backs and off our hairlines.

"I think it's gonna' rain," Momma said as she gazed out the screen door. Through it we could see the tops of the trees swaying together. Dark, frosty clouds moved quickly across the light purple sky. Mommy glanced at the clock that no one ever bothered to straighten; so it hung there on the greasy wall, crooked and dusty.

"It's 10:50."

We shifted around on the floor, hoping she wasn't referring to our bedtime. Bonny's chin tightened, and her dark blue eyes watered up as she tried not to yawn.

"Come on, let's go kids."

Momma held the kitchen door open for us. The napkins skittered down the hall. Kinny raced after them before they reached Rube's feet. Demi's face muscles twitched as he waited for us to walk slowly up the stairs. Momma stopped and talked to them. Rube waved to us when we called goodnight from the top of the stairs. Demi just nodded toward us. The porch door was still open. As we got undressed, we could hear the screen door bang after being pulled open by the wind. The moon and purple sky put a strange light on the road and pasture; everything was illuminated and clear. We scrambled into bed when we heard Momma's thick shoes clatter up the stairs.

"Say your prayers, boys?"

We nodded.

"Now, we know what happens to little boys who ferget to say prayers, don't we?"

I pushed myself farther under the sheets.

"The devil comes up and pitches their souls down into hell!"

Her eyes widened and her lower jaw struck out. She kissed us and left. We scrambled out of bed and quickly said our prayers.

Kinny said to stay awake and see if we could hear anything else. Finally, they moved from the hall back to the porch, and their voices floated up to our open window. We sat on our knees, ignoring the floor register that left lines imprinted on our kneecaps and strained to hear them. Rube said she was staying with us for the night.

"Why? I asked Kinny in a low whisper. Kinny straightened up.

"Demi looks pretty mad. Maybe they had a fight."

I nodded. We watched Demi give a wave toward the porch and climb into his large Cadillac. We could hear the bottom of his car crunch up against the side of the road as he backed onto it. He directed the car into the center of the road and back to the shoulder to avoid the potholes that Harlen had forgotten to fill. We watched his white headlights follow the road wildly. Finally, we climbed into our beds, damp with a night sweat and tossed around trying to find cool spots on the sheets.

The next morning, I didn't wake up until nine. Kinny was still curled up asleep, breathing softly. Usually, we were wakened at seven, only on Saturdays were we allowed to sleep so late. I woke up Kinny. The house was silent, and there was no smell of breakfast. We walked downstairs; it felt almost like Christmas morning, when all of your excitement is stuck in your throat and your legs are running uncontrollably in a bee line to the tree, except our legs didn't know where to go. Someone humming directed us to the kitchen. It was Aunt Whit.

"Hi, boys! Have a seat!"

Her face was bright and her eyes glowed with health. We hated going over to Aunt Whit's place. She was older than Momma but was really into being healthy. We felt sorry for her grandkids, Billy and Wanda. Snacks to her were wheat-bran cookies with raisins, and she always drank stuff like cranberry juice and water. She would always smile and yell to us, "A clean system is the key to long like, boys!"

We hesitantly sat down to our wheat toast and fruit salad breakfast. "Where's the eggs and bacon?" Kinny asked.

"Too much cholesterol, boys. Now, see here, you got all your vitamins and good stuff all in this! No oils or preservatives!"

He nodded and moved his fruit around in the bowl.

"Where's everybody?" I finally asked.

Aunt Whit jumped. "Oh yeah. Sorry 'bout that, forgot to tell you." She sat down at the table at such a strange angle that the sunshine came in and went through her convex eyeball and made her look inhuman. "Well, you boys do understand that sometimes, people do things that they shouldn't do—we all do." She took a deep breath and concentrated on the grooves in the table. "Last night, Rube stayed here for the night, and that man Adolf came back."

Kinny sat up. "You mean, after we went to sleep?"

"Yes, I suppose so; it was very late you understand. Well, Rube just got up and left." She threw her hands in the air. "She left a letter saying she was leaving , but Demi is convinced she was forced to write the note while Adolf held a gun to her head and so on." She shook her head.

Kinny looked at her. "So where's everybody?"

"Down at the police station with Demi. Won't do no good, though. If she's gone, she's gone. Poor Demi. Can't get that through his head." Aunt Whit stood up and poured herself a glass of water.

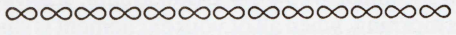
"Where's Harlen and Bonny?" I asked.

"Bonny's asleep, I guess, and Harlen went to the store to get me some wheat germ and bean sprouts."

We nodded. When she left the room, we dumped our fruit out and stole away with a box of Sugar Pops.

Aunt Whit was right—going down to the police station did no good. She was gone. After a while, Demi gave up his old job and took up driving an eighteen-wheeler, with pictures of his Rube in his cab and wallet, asking everyone if they had ever seen her.

As for Rube, we got Christmas cards postmarked Oklahoma telling of her new-found happiness and love. Momma shook her head when she read the cards and preached to us about living in sin. Daddy would stare at the cards and say things like, "Rube was always such a smart girl, just don't know what happened." We daydreamed of our lost Rube and the strange Adolf who, on a warm night, swept her away to Oklahoma's deep plains and oilfields.



Finally Sleeping

by

Steven A. Mitchell

Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep in class. Do not, under any circumstance whatsoever, go to sleep in this class.

Ernie's head rolled down his left shoulder on its path to oblivion. The journey had started, as it always did, with Ernie wide awake, his eyes focused intently on the blackboard, where Master Instructer Fandon was placing his neat little chalkmarks. One after the other, those chalk marks paced Ernie's slumping progress. During the explanation of basic force lines, his eyes had begun to glaze. As Master Fandon's chalk moved to the intersection of counter-positive energies, Ernie's head moved through a gently sloping arc, and as the chalk completed the formula of interdimensional plane expansion, Ernie's head landed askance.

His head leaped to attention. The first trickle of sweat dripped from his forehead onto his calculator, and Ernie stole a look at the clock. Twenty-three minutes to go.

He just had to get an A in this class. He had blown Technical Applications, but he had secured a B in History of Ancients, while his Natural Philosophy grade topped the class. With a year of plane languages under his belt already, this class determined his status for the next year. The reason he had taken it in the first place was that it was supposed to be an easy A. No one had bothered to warn him, however, that Fandon didn't believe in easy A's. Throughout the semester, Ernie had worked to all hours of the night, had burned the midnight candle, but Fandon was such a slimey little . . .

"Mr. Simon!" screamed Master Fandon, "would you be so kind as to explain to the class the relationship between plane theory and energy, or are you in another plane already?"

Ernie came out of his reverie at his name. "Oh no. Master Fandon, sir, I mean, yes, that is, sir . . .

"Never mind, Mr. Simon." Fandon slid his glare to another student.

"Almost blew it," thought Ernie, "I'll get detention for sure this time." He silently pulled a single sheet of paper from his folder. The printed lines returned Ernie's blank stare as he thought about Millicent. He grinned slightly. She would like this. She had told him the story last week when he was home on vacation, and he had laughed for over an hour. His own little record of her story wasn't much, but he liked it, and besides, it might keep him awake. He began to read it to himself:

The Lady and her Lizard

It happened once upon a time,
Not so very long ago,
When the lady who inspired this rhyme,
Was not quite six years old.

She had a little lizard pet,
All scaly, hard and green.
A more disgusting pet, you've never met.
Most have seldom seen.

Then there came a fateful day,
When she set out to show,
The lizard need not run away,
For she would let him go.

With eyes that shed a tear or two
A goodbye gaze she took.
The lizard had been good and true.
Her hands, they fairly shook.

Then that time, it came around—
I'll tell you what she did—
She put that lizard on the ground,
Like any old six-year kid.

But before she set her lizard down,
She held him in her hand,
Without as much as a little frown,
Did something I don't understand:

To the lizard her lips she gave,
And I think that you'll agree,
That only a truly foolish knave,
Could love her just like me.

For it truly would be bliss,
I'm afraid I must admit,
If I could only steal a kiss,
From the lips the lizard bit.

"Mr. Simon, how many times do I have to tell you!" The words exploded from Master Fandon as he snatched the paper from Ernie's loose grasp. Ernie melted into his seat. "I'll see you after class, Mr. Simon." Fandon kept Ernie's only copy.

Ernie gritted his teeth in frustration. Why did the class have to be so boring anyway? It wasn't that the subject lacked interest; Ernie had dabbled in Theory for years. Somehow Fandon's voice lulled his students into complacency, and then he got them.

Unnoticed by Ernie, his head began its previous journey again. This time, as it drifted to a settled rest, Master Fandon watched out of the corner of his eye, only half a mind still on the blackboard. Slowly, gently, peaceful slumber overcame Ernie. His body began to relax as all the built up tenseness of several overwrought weeks lost its hold. If Ernie had been awake to hear it, he would have heard a small sigh issue from his lips and the rustle of clothing folding in among itself.

The awakening came with such rude adruptness, that Ernie almost fell out of his seat. What was that voice, and how had Ernie gotten himself out to the gym? Teleportation was a 400 level course and scheduled for Ernie's senior year. Blam! A thousand tramping feet, coming from nowhere, stomped his mind into fragments. Ernie began to pick himself up, but hesitated at an unfamiliar voice.

"Get up, Mr. Simon." The voice had an edge—it sounded like a paper cut feels.

Ernie straightened with a bone-jarring crunch. Somehow the coarse texture of the voice brooked no argument. An electric shock immediately began to build on Ernie's head. He glanced upward at a small storm cloud which returned his gaze with a sizzling blue bolt.

"Attention, Mr. Simon."

"But, wha, wha, what did I . . ." Ernie raised his head in mid-stutter in time to see a wicked curved blade cut his body in half. The pain was immense, but how was he still alive? He had to do some . . .

"Heads up, Mr. Simon."

Ernie began to run. The sound of running feet pouned behind him, but he was afraid to look. Down the hall past the dressing rooms, Ernie leaped into the tunnel that led to the classrooms. Sudden realization froze Ernie's feet to the floor, bringing his headlong flight to a halt. "Not now, not the test. No!"

As Ernie panicked, three hundred pounds of solid green muscle and scales sauntered into the hall and casually leaned its nine-foot bulk against the doorjamb. Talons six inches long paled in comparison to the teeth that shone from a smirking smile. The saliva that drooled from the creature's mouth made little holes as it hissed onto the concrete.

After picking a piece of some unspeakable substance from its teeth, the Test flicked its long, scaly tail and addressed Ernie. Roughly translated, it was something like, "Afraid so, dog breath. Now me and you can go back in here and finish this more or less peacefully, or I can chase you all over this . . ."

Ernie—who had apparently learned more about other dimensional plane language than he thought—took the second choice, or so it seemed, for he turned and fled down the hall, the Test in hot pursuit. Ducking into the lab, Ernie tried to dodge a mind blast aimed at his head. He managed to avoid most of it but staggered a bit as he shut and locked the door. Leaping over a lab table, breaking beakers on his way, he propelled himself through a window as the Test bit the door in two. Glass fragments took on a life of their own. Ernie looked back to see a cloud of them at his heals just as he stepped into a hole. As he went down, the cloud caught up with him.

The Test laughed. "Had enough, kid?" Ernie didn"t answer, only groaned. "Fandon thinks you"re ready for the final, huh. Well, lets see some fight. Come on! Send me back where I came from . . . if you can." No answer made it from Ernie's inert body while the Test chuckled menacingly. So finally, with a bored shrug, the Test grabbed him by the collar, and back to the gym they went.

No one ever commented when the gym attendant posted the closed sign. Ever so often, the sign would go up, and the students—that is, the remaining students—would spend an extra hour in the library. Ernie's classmates looked at the closed sign. Then they looked at each other. One by one they trudged off, some glancing apprehensively over their shoulders where muffled thuds mingled with gasps and groans escaped the gym with the smell of ozone.

Next morning, Master Fandon informed the Dean that he had a vacancy. Mr. Simon had decided to take the final early. A glassy-eyed youngster in the Dean's highback visitor chair perked up at the news.

Ernie wasn't so bad; he just didn't learn. For you see, Ernie flunked the final of Magic Theory 101 at the University of Wizardry. Do not ever go to sleep while taking Master Fandon's class. Don't go to sleep in his class. Don't go to sleep.

The Young Man In The Ditch

by

Bryce R. Northen

When Joseph found the young man in the ditch he didn't know if the young man was dead or not, but now Joseph knew that he must be. He had thought the young man was merely sleeping there, but then he realized that the young man never moved. Now Joseph stopped at the ditch every day, and wondered what to do about the young man, and about why he was in the ditch. Of course, Joseph didn't have an answer to either question. His favorite idea was that the young man was killed by gangsters that Joseph had heard lived in the city, but mostly he figured that the man had just fallen there drunk and never gotten up. Maybe he hit his head in the fall. Joseph didn't know, and wasn't sure he would ever know the truth about the young man in the ditch.

Everyday, on his way back from town, Joseph would stop and look at the young man for awhile before continuing his walk home. Usually, he only came up with new ideas about the young man when he was looking at him, but he was always thinking about the young man in the ditch.

At first, the main thing he thought about was whether or not to tell anyone, but once he decided to keep the young man for himself, he devoted all his thoughts to figuring out why the young man was there and who he had been before Joseph had met him. Joseph didn't tell anyone because he was afraid of what they would do when they found out. He felt sure that people would come and ask him questions. It also occurred to him that he might be blamed for the young man's death, but the main reason Joseph didn't tell anyone was because he wanted the young man for himself. He figured that if he told anyone, then they would surely take the young man away.

Joseph and the young man were alone now, and that was how Joseph liked it. Joseph didn't like people. People asked Joseph questions that he couldn't answer, and they looked at him funny when he walked into town. It wasn't like that with the young man in the ditch. He always felt safe around the young man in the ditch because he couldn't look at Joseph like other people did since the young man was lying face down. Joseph figured that the young man's eyes were closed anyway.

Joseph sometimes wondered if the young man was his friend, but he didn't know how to find out. Joseph felt sure that he was, but of course he had no way of finding out how the young man felt.

The ditch was not very deep, or Joseph might not have ever noticed the young man, and it had no running water, so the young man lay there in veritable peace. It was on the western side of the road, and since Joseph walked into town on the opposite side, he could only see the young man on his way back from town. Joseph never missed a chance to check on the young man. Even on days when the weather was bad he would stop for at least a few minutes to look at the young man and wonder.

As could be expected, Joseph began talking to the young man after awhile. He would tell him of his trips to town to check the mail for a letter from his brother who had left for the city years before. Usually he only got things from companies in the city that wanted Joseph to buy things from them. Since Joseph couldn't read he usually threw those away.

His brother had never liked the house in the country where they lived, so he had left, promising to write when he could. At first he did. He even sent a picture of himself standing in front of a big building in the city once, but he hadn't written Joseph in about a year. Joseph didn't know why his brother didn't, at least he didn't think about it since he found the young man in the ditch.

Joseph never thought about it, but he was very content with his life. He grew everything he needed on the farm, and except for when people got lost, no one ever bothered him out there. The only stressful part of his life was his daily trip into town, and if no one bothered him the trips weren't too bad. Now that he had found the young man in the ditch he actually looked forward to his trips into town. He even started getting up earlier so he could be coming back from town sooner, and get to see the young man sooner. Sometimes he would sit on the side of the road for hours watching the young man, and talking to him. No one ever came down Joseph's road, so no one bothered him.

It wasn't too long though before all the time Joseph spent with the young man caused him to fall behind in doing his work on the farm. Joseph decided he would have to stop visiting the young man as much so he could catch up with his work. He did try not to stay with the young man as long, but Joseph just couldn't help it. He found himself staying longer and longer. He was drawn to the young man in the ditch.

One day, as Joseph was sitting by the ditch, he realized that if he took the young man home with him, he would be able to work the farm all day, and still visit with the young man at night. Joseph got so excited that he got up right away, and ran home to get things ready for the young man. Joseph even forgot to say goodbye.

The next morning when he went into town he took a blanket to carry the young man home in. But something happened on his way to town. As he got close to the place where he knew the young man was, he saw two men standing on the other side of the road. They were looking at the young man in the ditch. Joseph hid in the woods to see if they would hurt his young friend, but after awhile they left and headed back to town. Relieved, Joseph waited and let them get ahead, then came out of the woods and went on to town too.

Joseph hadn't really thought about his real reason for going to town in quite some time, but he was reminded of it when he found a letter for himself in the mail. He knew as soon as he saw it that it was from his brother. He opened it right there in the post office and stared at it a long time, wondering what it said. He decided it would be better to take it to the drugstore the next day, now he was too worried about the young man in the ditch.

On his way back he was passed by an ambulance going into town, and immediately he realized that the men must have sent it to take the young man in the ditch from him. He began to run up the road. When he got to the ditch Joseph found that indeed, the young man was gone. With a cry, he leapt into the ditch where his friend had lain for so long, and lay there silent.

The sheriff, coming back from seeing if Joseph knew anything about the decomposed body they had found in the ditch, didn't need to stop again, so he didn't see Joseph lying there. In fact the body wasn't found for a couple of weeks.

And She Was
by
Winter Daniels

"Lawd Child! You are a temple of female flesh!" Lila hadn't used the high Southern accent since the almost-rape in New Orleans. I saved her. Well, I don't know who was saved. By the time Lila's screams reached me through the Mardi Gras din, the alley I stepped into was filled with the screams of her assailant. He was a set of bloody scratches that had obviously been nut-kicked. When I pulled Lila off she asked me to "Kill it." Lila has her own Law.

"Honey bear, you just sit tight now. Lila will part this sea of humanity, and lead you by your lovely hand into the *Promised Land!"*

She said it with a hand on her hip and the other thrown into the air, producing one quick snap of fingers. Showtime. Lila hadn't moved from the doorway. Fifty people stood between her and the object of her desire: A sixteen year-old drop-dead blonde. The speed that Lila catches the scent of fresh meat at has always amazed me.

"Dahlin', kindly step aside p*ah-leeze*! Can you not see that I am on a mission of Mercy? And *mercymercymercy*, but don't that sweet child have legs about a week and one-half long!"

Lila fanned herself with her hand as if she were about to have an attack of the vapors. She snapped her fingers in three quick flourishes (A move she had seen every drag queen, *ever*, do. And who in their turn had ripped the movement off of Patti Labelle). She lowered her head with a finely exaggerated movement. Lila was taking a moment. As she raised her head, she had a tear in her eye. In a stage whisper, she said "Oh sweet sweet child. Lila is touched that she has been given this precious opportunity. Dear one, I see *great things*— such *wonderful things."*

Again she bowed and raised her head, but quickly, taking her praise for such a tender moment on stage, not even a quarter of the way to her destination.

And as much as I hated it, Lila couldn't reach the blue-eyed, bright haired, black leather miniskirted young lady, who was wild-eyed drunk in the back of the room. Oh, but Lila wouldn't be pleased. Certainly not. I couldn't allow it. I had been warned.

Seems the vision in Lila's starry (probably Canadian whiskey soaked) eyes was the sister of one Denson L. Grooms, asshole at large.

"Honey, you just remove yourself and that tacky day-glo outfit out of my way! I am on the path to Glory. The shoes are nice, but they don't match the outfit. Excuse me."

Since Lila was making her usual entrance, it would take her some time to make any real progress; so, I went to the bar to make Lila and me some properly strong cocktails.

Den Grooms drives one of those big Trans-Ams with an over-large engine and tires. Those cars always struck me as the equivalent of wearing a T-shirt with "My pecker is bigger than anyone's alive" embossed on it. Shit, true rednecks won't drive the things anymore. He liked to go fagot bashing and Den hated Lila. She had made a fool of him once. He helped.

Den had heard that Lila was queer, and he told anybody that would listen that all she needed was a "good fucking."

Anyway Den cornered her in a local bar and preceded to tell Lila of the Joys of Bedding Den. She was as nice and patient as she could be, for as long as she could stand to be either. Lila eventually slapped Den and said "You are incredibly dense, aren't you? It would be cute if you were a labrador retreiver, except you can train a lab to quit humping your leg. I am a *lesbian*, asswipe. And the amount of loathsome smelling musk oil you apply to yourself and in what areas, or the number of times you can get it up in one evening, cannot, does not, will not interest me — *Ever."*

Of course Lila said it loud enough to be heard in the far reaches of the bar. What she didn't know was that Den owned a Lab named Big One. Den had named the dog after his member. If Den had on old jeans, he would allow Big One to hump his leg.

Instead of just embarrassing Den, she managed to strike to the core of his soul. So, Den hated Lila. But I know why he tried. Lila is a wondrous, beautiful animal. She isn't lovable most times, but I love her anyway.

"Suh remove your hands from that young lady's buttock unless you intend to marry her, or at least acquire a suitable room at the Holiday Inn. Don't worry Precious Lila's coming!"

I mixed the drinks. Close to five ounces of good, sweet Canadian whiskey in tall glasses, with two icecubes, and a half-ounce of Co-cola for color. Lila was still entering slowly, insulting her way across the big room. Meaning: A big show. Meaning: She was savouring every moment. Meaning: She was going to be a shitload of trouble.

Den's dad was a fisherman of sorts. Old Grooms was the kind of fisherman that buys a $20,000 bass boat with 30 coats of clear paint over expensive plastic paint with metal flakes in it. Every depth gauge, radio, and any other piece of fishing electronics known to man was bolted onto the boat *Out Fishing* someplace in its hull. It also had an oversize live-well (50 U.S.gals.), and all the rods, reels, and lures that could be jammed in between the electronics. Denson Grooms' dad went fishing once or twice a year and cussed "The niggers on the bank catchin' fish with cane poles."

This didn't mean that old Grooms didn't deserve to live. He had only cheated on his wife once when he was very young. He picked up hitch-hikers and gave them what he believed to be sage advice; like, "Don't ever trust a man that don't train or attend to his dogs proper. That is a mean man. That is a man that will cross you." Hitch-hikers expect that shit.

But Den's dad did deserve to die in the way he did. Old Grooms put his boat in the water one morning and played with his depth finder, radio, rods and reels, and drank beer from the live well that was half full of ice and beer. Grooms also managed to make his wife wish she had never come. She hated bugs, water, heat, and she got seasick. Martha Grooms had always thought that Grooms was slipping out with other women on his fishing and hunting trips. Coming along was her way of keeping the old man honest. No, the Grooms' family has never been accused of being bright. About midafternoon he took the boat out of the water.

Now with most boats you can get away with pulling them out and leaving them attached only by the wench cable.

Especially if home is only ten miles down the road. But Grooms' Floating Frigate of Bass Death was 23 feet long and weighed better than 1500 pounds with all the depth gauges, radios, rods and reels, and live well half-full of beer. This thing weighed as much as the mid-sized pick-up that the mess was towed with. No brakes on the trailer, Grooms went 70mph everywhere he went

When the car pulled out in front of him Grooms slammed home the brakes. And it probably appeared as if he would stop in time; he was probably already calming down. Martha Grooms was probably feeling guilty about yelling "*OH SHIT OH SHIT OH SHIT!*" She was a good church woman. The good boat *Out Fishing* tore the cab of the Ford off even with the bed, and slid 137 feet into the parking lot of a Junior store.

"Alicia, what is that perfume you are wearin'? That scent might make a pussy cat horny dear, but you can't be out to seduce pussy cats, can you now honey?"

Lila would be in need of a job in the morning. I got Lila her present job in the antique shop Alicia manages. Lila was certainly switched *on*. When she gets catty, and moves the way she does, Lila is almost an irresistible force. There is so much sheer power in her beauty. A part of that beauty lay in that she had the legs to wear black stockings with seams up the backs. She could make a stone soldier horny with the way she looked, and moved.

"Alicia, stop shoving canape´s in your chubby little face, and look back there at that lovely, lovely girl. Couldn't you just eat her right up? And dearheart that is my *intention.*" Not the faintest hint of gainful employment, I took a good healthy slag from my drink.

Den and me were never friends. We played ball together in high school. I thought he was an asshole then. But we travel in the same circles, there aren't that many circles here. I was obliged to go to the funeral of the headless Grooms' because of mutual friends. Just as I was obliged to listen when Den brought Sissy to this party telling me that "I will shoot y'all deader than a whole goddamn box of doornails, if you or Lila either one lay a hand on Sissy!"

Den had taken shots at people before, but he had been real drunk on each occasion. Deep down Den didn't want to hurt anybody, he simply felt compelled to carry out the silly shit that came out of his mouth. I decided that Lila and me weren't to be any weird precedents in Den's silly shit. We are weird enough already.

Lila had made it two-thirds of the way into the room. Being catty catty catty all the damn way. I downed my drink and made another.

"Dahlin', I am attempting to get over there to my sweet Beloved. But girl! You are carrying enough spare tonnage to make a detour prohibitive, kindly move!"

Lordy but she was making a pro*fucking*duction. She was making me nervous. Lila has little resistance to start, and Sissy Grooms was more than equal to the task of looking like a hell-bent little tramp. Lila's hormones never had a chance. Beauty in the lust, and animal cunning in that room. Lust thicker than ugly green shag carpet. Cunning unmatched by wolverine or weasel. A*damn*mazing.

There is a room in my house that is paneled floor to ceiling along one wall and part of the sloping roof in glass. The room faces slightly north of true south and is all in white. It has a brass Turkish bed with a huge down mattress. Low canvas couches set all 'round. On the glassless portion of the ceiling is a bleached parachute hanging softly into the room. It is a cliche´ room, I know. Try such a room and you will obtain a glimpse of heaven. It is soft in there. Water music plays in there. It is cool, peaceful, and light.

I wrote one poem— ever. It was inspired by Lila in that room.

Listen:

Thunder

Sometimes the Morning
Breaks like Thunder
Sensation and New Day
Crashing life from reverent morning
Alarms and Whistles Hounding
Speed Speed Speed
Go live someone else's day
That Morning
Your Angel winged brown back
Stretched over barely hidden breast
Wisps of near white hair stray
A leg slips from cover
In a place of soft, white light
Sometimes
The morning doesn't come like
Thunder

I was bringing coffee. I saw her there in the Turkish bed and sat down in a near chair. She stirred and looked up. I said "You're beautiful you know?" She said "I love you."

Watching her now, winding across that room toward a wide-eyed vision she could not achieve, I had a vision of the two carefully entwined in the high, white room. Poor Lila. Poor Me. It couldn't happen.

"Girl, it has been so, so long! Don't you feel that in the bottom of your deepest heart that this moment, this very event was ordained for what we *will* and *must* be?!"

Sissy Grooms, I don't know how, hadn't noticed Lila until Lila stood less than five feet from her intended goal. Lila was smiling— no — grinning and peeling clothing from Sissy's taut, young body with animal, hungry eyes. Sissy seemed too drunk to be alarmed. Enter me.

Placing the drinks on the table next to Sissy and murmuring "pardon," I stood between them and spoke.

"Lila mustn't touch. Lila will cause big trouble."

She dropped the accent, putting wolf in her voice.

"Move! Lust is OK. I want her."

"No Lila."

I thought, "That asshole Den has done this to me. He leaves his sister here, gives me a bold-assed warning, and then runs off with the first woman amused with his musk oil. Just damn! What an utter prick."

"Move Now!"

"No Lila."

In an instant I catch Lila's thigh. The attached knee raced for my groin. I grab and throw her over my left shoulder.

Lila tries to crawl over my back in order to claw balls from behind. Squatting hard; launch back, flattening Lila on the floor. Lila fights hard. One doesn't have much choice in the way one fights back. Lila had the wind knocked out of her. She had lost consciousness. It wouldn't be for long.

Putting a limp Lila over my shoulder was easier. I maneuvered to get the drinks from Sissy's table. Doing some undressing with my own eyes, I muttered "Lord Child..."

Sissy's face was quizzical as I left the party with my package. She had no way of knowing what had been on Lila's mind. But with a brother and a dead family like hers, it might have been only a little time and some good, sweet Canadian whiskey to get her to taste some life too.

The crowd didn't take real notice of me and my baggage. Most of these people are a jaded, useless mess.

Lila was easily placed into the wide door and onto the wide seat of my Cadillac. It had been done with a drunken Lila times before. On the day I got that convertible, canary yellow, befinned boat, we drove to the beach. She played the stereo too loud, but I didn't mind. As the sun played on that spring-windy day, Lila lay in the sand and asked "Is there a god?" I couldn't tell her.

She had been out for a little more than five minutes when she started to stir. I sat on the pavement, out of Lila's reach, sipping my drink and holding hers. Suddenly, she was wide awake with rage in those huge blue eyes; then, the eyes calmed and looked puzzled.

"You never hit me before. You must have a good reason?"

"She is Den's little sister."

"So?"

"He said something about a gun."

"He never hits anything."

"Lila!"

Sam Waseman's car pulled up into the space next to us. I got up and placed my head outside the open driver's window.

"Sam, what's the matter?"

"I came to get Sissy Grooms."

The man was clearly rattled and had been crying. Sam is noted for his emotionalisms.

Lila asked "What's wrong Sam?"

"Denson wrapped his car around a telephone pole. He died about a half-hour ago. He... He bled to death before they could get him out. I...I wa...was drivin...driving b-by and..."

Sam lost control, started weeping.

Lila smiled "That's awful Sam!"

"She needs to come to the hospital and claim him." Sam croaked through the tears.

Lila smiled "That's awful Sam!"

"His girlfriend told me Sissy was here. She was wearing her seat belt... Oh damn... Denson always drives too fast... drove too fast... Oh shit oh damn..."

I smiled at Lila and handed her her drink. Turning to Sam with all the sympathy and solemn good faith that I could muster and said "Sam, you're pretty beat. I talked to the girl at the funeral, and I have a rapport with the poor thing. She will take it hard, but I think it will be better coming from me."

Sam looked wrecked and whimpered "Oh god I had forgotten about the parents! Poor, poor girl. So young and so much death."

Lila smiled "Oh so much death!"

I thought of the white room "Go on home Sam. I'll do this."

Sam nodded through his now racking sobs. A drama junkie through and through. He began backing out wailing "So young, so young..."

Lila smiled "So young, so young. Don't you worry Sam, that poor girl will be in good hands here." She began to giggle.

Before Lila knew what hit her, I had. It was a clean strike barely below and behind her right ear with the heel of my hand. It wouldn't kill her but it would put her out for better than twelve hours in my rough estimation. She would wake up with a hellatious headache and a mean temper for my trouble.

It took ten minutes to drive Lila home and put her in my bed. I walked down stairs to make sure all was in order in the white room. There was the consoling of a beautiful orphan to be done. Different entwinings filled my mind. It was my duty to go and befriend the orphaned Sissy Grooms and to answer Lila's question about God.

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More on the ever Popular Art of Counting Foetal Poultry or How Did I Get Here?

by

Winter Daniels

Ever had an egg slide whizzing by your ear? If thrown correctly, and it jukes end over oblong end, the sound resembles, more or less, an asthmatic baby helicopter: THWUP THWUP —WOOOSH. Having the egg hit you is a whole other concern.

"You didn't even sleep with her—DID YOU! Damnit Damnit Damnit!"

Lila had a good, athletic stance in front of the ice-box. THWUP THWUP—WHOOOSH Her form was almost perfect in the depositing of the missiles. Had I not been wielding a 12 inch skillet (the eggs made a THPWANG sound on it) the eggs would have done their job in the middle of my forehead.

"My head hurts, and I have a bruise and you— YOU — didn't even attempt to fuck her!" THWUP THWUP — WHOOOSH ... THPWANG.

Lila was out of eggs. I harbored the secret desire that she wouldn't start hurling canned biscuits; otherwise, breakfast would be shot.

"And you have locked the door to your silly-assed white room and won't let me play with her! SHIT SHIT SHIT!"

A can of biscuit, when thrown correctly, doesn't make a sound. The can spirals through the air, rear-end slightly down,

spinning and turning; owing and paying little heed to skillets. THWAAPANG!

> House Rule #1: Never throw, or otherwise cause to make violently mobile, any object(s) that will (or can) cause damage (or harm) to anyone (or anything) within the confines of the house proper.
>
> The exception to the rule is found in the kitchen, because it is sturdy and easily cleaned. If tantrums are to be had at all please confine them to the kitchen and confine missiles to soft food items. Lila, don't even *think* about cutlery.

Lila had once chunked a very large and heavy crystal ashtray at my head. The ashtray embedded itself in the 3/4 inch oak paneling in the den. The ashtray was intact; it is a good ashtray; I still use it sometimes. I ducked, and my head is still intact; I think my head is a good head, since I still use it sometimes. Therefore, I installed the only *written* house rule.

"WHY WHY WHY?"

Lila collapsed into a ball of heavy sobs and heaves onto the floor.

"Goddamnit! You never let me do anything! Always, 'No Lila this' or 'No Lila that.' Bitch bitch bitch all the damn time."

She sat semi-sprawled in the open door of the ice-box, wearing the same dark blue T-shirt I had put her to bed in the night before. The shirt and her hair were wrinkled from sleep. An indication that the situation was serious enough that Lila hadn't made her religious morning bathroom visit.

Lila rule#1: Never be suckered in by her crying during a fight.

I let my guard down long enough for Lila to wing a cantaloup that had been cunningly hidden in the fold of her body when she had hunkered down to howl. The cantaloup smacked me solidly on the forehead. THWIP-SQUEESH I sat down dazed on the floor.

"HA!" squealed Lila.

She quick-crawled over to my sprawling place, and bit my big toe, not real hard, just enough to let me know she was there.

"Well you big turd, that was for hitting me the first time..." and taking my skillet-cum-shield, Lila hit me hard in the stomach "... and THAT is for the rest!"

I wasn't hurt. I had feigned being stunned by the cantaloup only to assuage Lila's sense of justice being served. The refrigerator was near empty, and a slab of bacon was sliding down the wall toward my cantaloup-splattered head. I moved slightly to avoid the meat.

"You know that the biscuits were out of line?"

"Yes."

The trip back to the party was turning me sober. And as much as it irked me, I started to think as rationally as I am capable of. Bedding the bereaved sixteenyearoldsexpot Sissy Grooms would have been *possible* (grief, lending a sympathetic heart, and the liberal application of Canadian whiskey are a wonderful aphrodisiac), but it would have been a shitty thing to *do*.

The dead Grooms family had done little to make any friends, especially none that could look after the girl. The dead Den had been her last family. That decided me. The idea of anybody being the ward of the government juvenile system caused the ugly, little head of pseudo-Christian morality to raise-up in my own ugly little head. Quoth Lila: "Shit Shit Shit!"

I made the decision that one Sissy Grooms, orphaned of a dead, (but even in death) anal retentative family was going to get a fair shot at some kind of family life. I decided the whole matter on an increasingly banging head, the full knowledge that Lila was liable to kill me, and I did it because I believe that everyone should get a chance to grow up in an environment devoid of literal and figurative fucking with. I couldn't/wouldn't let the fact that the dear-child had legs enough for heartache blur my vision. And I would have to explain to Lila. Quoth Lila: "Shit Shit Shit!"

Mustering up strength, courage, and good intentions, I strode into the room I had earlier left so suddenly, expecting to comfort a grief stricken orphan in her hour of need. Since it was only Den dead, it wasn't *real* sympathy, but I was prepared to give it a try.

Sissy hadn't moved but some second-hand rain coat and real cool band T-shirt type had moved in. Sissy was hopelessly drunk, and the raincoat was being only as obvious as his entire eighteen years would allow him to be.

"If we go back to my place we can do a bong, and I got condoms." He had on dirty jungle boots. I kicked the jungle boots.

"Get the fuck outta here butthead."

"Who died and left you Arnold Schwarzneger?" He grinned it at me and looked to Sissy for approval. I forced the extended, rigid fingers of my right hand into the place between his neck and collarbone, and stomped hard on the end of his left, cheap jungle boot.

"OuShit!"

"Leaving now weasel breath?"

I'll give him that he had sense enough to leave. Sissy had a confused and frustrated look on her face.

"Hey! Why did you chase whatisname away for? He was cute! Hey! Are you that guy that squashed that funny woman just a little-while ago? Hey! why you so mean? Hey! You're kinda cute."

Hopelessly drunk.

"Kinda cute, for a short guy anyway." It was the excuse I was looking for; the one to make the job easier.

"Yeah and you're an almost six foot tall freak woman and your brother is dead!" Hopelessly childish, but I'm touchy about my height.

"What! Hey! My brother will come and get you, you mean little shrimp!"

"No. No, I don't think he will. He's very dead." I said it with just a tad of jolly old sort sing song.

"Hey! What's the deal?" She looked to be sobering quickly.

"Look, I am a friend. You need to come with me. Get your things and I'll explain."

A morgue has white rooms too. These places are

cold and have rows of metal doors. I guess that it is peaceful for the occupants, but the temporary guests, the people come to see the borders; well, peace wasn't on my mind. The attendant tried to make us come back in the morning. Sissy and I both reeked of whiskey. She hadn't had a grief attack as of yet, but had confidently taken the bottle from me as I had explained her situation in the Caddy. I had stoked myself up on the way over too. The attendant thought it improper for the drunk to view the dead. I had explained to Sissy that she didn't have to look at the body, but when she said she wanted to see it, I figured it would be OK, if only to assure her Den was dead.

"No Sir! Ain't nobody goin' in that room drunk. I ain't got the time to clean up no mess." It had been a very long evening. And it had been a violent one. In for a penny...

"Ain't got no time for no viewin' paper neither, no Sir."

"Would you be so kind as to escort myself and the young lady into that room, and take care of the business you are being paid for Sir?" I carry my Granddaddy's bone handle straight razor. If used as a weapon, it is purely for defense. I handle it very well though. The tiny bushido move from my pocket and back was enough. The man showed us inside.

Sissy looked at Den, emotionless. He was white too. He had a great bloodless gash in his forehead. Sissy said "He's out of blood, isn't he?" I shrugged my shoulders yes.

I took responsibility for Den's earthly remains. Burying Den hadn't been in my plans, neither was a sudden orphan. It had been a seriously too-long day. Sissy hadn't shown any emotion, was entirely sober, and maintained a blank look. I guess it happens that way sometimes. No nothing for days, or weeks and then...

We got some of Sissy's things at the dead Den house. I told her she could stay with me awhile if she liked.

"But I'm going to have to lock you in a room by yourself just for tonight!"

"Why?" She seemed no more concerned over this than any of the rest of the evenings strangeness.

"That funny-girl I squashed at the party lives with me."

"Is she your girlfriend?" Not a single clue.

"Well, no, ah she isn't. But it's just that, well burglars have been in the neighborhood and I wouldn't want Lila to be startled by a visitor. She's at home... asleep."

I put Sissy down in the room, and she fell asleep almost immediately. She couldn't know that she was in for a new lifestyle. Neither did Lila. Lila would have to be watched until she could be explained to. I pulled a chair in front of the door to the white room. It had been a long day, the next days were liable to be as long. I sat down in the chair for rest. Dreams invaded my rest, showing in cantering angles and weird-strained colors young women in spring linens, dancing in rainstorms laughing, twirling, skipping a dance through puddles of water that danced with light of its own. A door somewhere kept opening without what was on the other side of it being revealed. The single shot I heard was Lila waking me, screaming.

"Gunther Pablo Greatheart! You *little* asshole! What are you doing out here?"

"What time is it?" I was fully alert, but feigned drowsiness to buy enough time to think in the face of the screaming Lila.

"Don't you 'What time is it' me you *little* turd. I want a lot of answers, and I DAMN WELL WANT THEM NOW!"

I did owe her some answers— she wasn't going to get them until I was damn good and ready though. Anyway, she knows I'm ticky about my height. Lila knew the use of the word "little" wasn't going to bring a quick response. Lila was bear baiting and knew it. I had hit her, but she was being tacky and self serving.

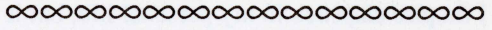
"Listen bitch, how many *little* turds weigh 175lbs, have only 4% body fat, and can bench 190% of their bodyweight?"

"How many 5'4" midgets are man enough to hit a poor defenceless young woman in love? Big man. Ooh I liked it... hit me some more... *little* turd *little* turd *little* turd."

She didn't have to say it. She could think it all she pleased. But she didn't have to *say* it. She left me no choice.

"Lila would you accompany me to the kitchen?"

"Why yes." She ran toward the place before I could get the jump on her yelling "little turd little turd little turd" all the way. Lila has a better arm than me. I only got away one misfired orange before the deluge began.



The End
by
Winter Daniels

Lila wouldn't let me put the fucker in a pine box. It wouldn't have been one of those unstained boothill jobs from *Gunsmoke*, but I couldn't see the point of spending more good money than was necessary on a dead body that in life I had despised. Cremation was cheaper yet, but Sissy had said that he said "I don't want to burn no quicker than I have to." I can buy that. The casket that Lila picked out was an oak brass-railed monster that was guaranteed water tight for 100 years. When I asked "Who the hell is going to dig it up and check?" Lila and the undertaker looked at me with a disgusted 'you'll be worm-food too one day' look. It was Lila's funeral, Den was only going to be there because he was dead. And I was going to be giving the check to the Funeral Director.

Lila got flowers and sent announcements. She even found our old football coach to give an eulogy. Lila couldn't back-off the pageantry. The only way I could save myself, from having Den's corpse laid out in my front room, was by swearing to Lila that if the body stayed one night in the house, I was going to butcher the thing in her bedroom, leave the head under the pillow, and scatter the remaining parts over the yard so that the dogs would have something to eat and wouldn't turn over the garbage for at least one night.

Sissy never did have a grief attack. The first morning after the clean-up, Lila got a fair explanation and unequivocal set of conditions for Sissy's presence in the house. When Sissy

got unlocked from the white room and joined us for a breakfast of peanut butter toast, and black coffee, Lila's whole attitude seemed to have changed. She was concerned about Sissy's school, about *boyfriends* and asked, "Sissy are you on the cheerleading squad or the majorettes?"

It goes "grinned like a coon," I think. That was how I was grinning, I think. Because I had no idea what Lila was up to. She was mothering this girl, trying to be her friend. Lila never gives up that easy. Maybe, all the hitting and screaming had convinced Lila. Maybe, Lila was thinking about her own past and giving the girl a break. Maybe, my dead Mexican grandmother was going to sit-up in her grave and ask for a drink of tequila.

Finishing my delicious peanut butter toast and listening about the crinolines Lila had worn to the senior prom, I got up to pour more coffee. Lila hadn't been to high school. Senior prom? Crinolines? I had gone that dazey deaf one gets in the morning after you've had things thrown at your head, and somebody scatters out bullshit. Since I wasn't really listening to them it took me a second to understand Sissy when she halted their conversation and said "Mr. Greatheart would you like a blow-job now? Den always liked a little blowjob after breakfast; said it relaxed him. When he'd bring them boys he run with over, why I'd relax 'em all. . ."

I despise slapstick in my personal life, but it was an involuntary action that found me turning with saucer sized eyes and spewing a large mouthful of coffee over the table and utter-yelling "What!?" simultaneously with Lila.

Sissy was beaming—going toward wondering; she was proud—getting confused; her eyes wide—going narrow. Lila and me exchanged the definitive look for bewildered getting more bewildered, then I blurted

"Well Sissy I don't expect a. . . Uh I mean it isn't acceptable to offer. . . Listen I know you mean well, but. . ."

Lila looked with unveiled disgust at me and said "Gunther, leave. I'll handle it."

Lila became Sissy's protector. Den had been being a little more than just a standard asshole, he had cruised unassisted into being a super-duty industrial strength asshole. Den was a prick, but he never lacked somebody stupid enough to lay down in those gold satin sheets with him. Why did he need sister nookie?

Lila had had a fucked-up home. Her Daddy molested her from just about the time she got breasts. Lila thinks around 11, she doesn't remember well. The man didn't violate her. He would just run his hands over her fast developing body at every opportunity. Lila's mother was either too scared, too drunk, didn't know, or was a party to it. The woman left about the time of Lila's first menses. Lila doesn't remember much of that either, save Daddy getting drunk and muttering "old enough to bleed, old enough to breed." Lila had been to the sex education classes at school, and knew enough to know what Daddy meant. Lila didn't want babies. And if the fondlings she had been receiving as "Daddy's little girl" were any indication of what it was going to be like being "Daddy's little woman," Lila wanted no part of it. But when you're 11...

By the time Lila reached 13, she was 5'7" tall, roundly bosomed with matching hips, and pouty-sultry lips. She is little changed now, a couple of inches taller, and she remembers the dimensions of her young body because of Daddy's insistence upon drawing attention to what he called "my Little Peach." One morning, amongst the ritual fondlings, fingerings, and droolings, Daddy sent Lila off to school with an extra pinch on the butt, and a spare diddle for a nipple, and these words:"Daddy will have a Big Surprise for his Little Peach when she gets home from school." Daddy called his dick 'Big Surprise' and Lila had played with Big Surprise before. Lila understood that Daddy meant to halt his private moratorium on penetration. Lila smiled, said "That's nice, and Lila said "Goodbye Daddy," and left for school, and kept right on walking passed school, and didn't stop until she reached Atlanta. How can a Daddy desire daughter nookie?

Tommy Stock was a 50-odd, flat-topped old Spartan when he had coached me and Den in the over glorified art of football. Nobody I knew thought it odd that this bachelor dedicated fall afternoons to yelling inanities like "Gut Check!" at boys covered in dirt and blood. Coach Stock eventually became much talked over because he neither smoked, drank, cussed, had a girlfriend, or indulged in any other vice insofar as anyone knew. Then he married Coach Tidwell. Coach Tidwell was much murmured over because every year one of the cheerleaders, or volleyball players, or just someone from a gym class would start a rumor that Doris Tidwell was staring at their asses or tits while they showered or changed clothes. I put such things in the category of youthful idealism and wished it was me doing the staring. The sturdy, rumored-to-be-monk, married the sturdy, rumored-to-be-lesbian, and had six sturdy, known-to-be arrogant children in a Herculean five years.

Coach Stock was at the lectern rumbling about "spent promise of youth," and telling the funeral party what a great quarterback Den had been. Stock was the fifth eulogiser. I was to be the sixth. Lila wanted Den buried *good.* She went as far as to have the hole dug twelve-feet deep. Lila wanted Den *buried* good. She had a procession of Sissy's school-friends file by graveside to put 'icons' on the casket suspended there. Among the icons: an ankh, a cross, a Star of David, the Trans-Am hood device from Den's car, a framed condom (the first off the line upon Den's promotion to line supervisor), and a bottle of musk oil. Lila isn't superstitious or religious. Lila wanted Den *buried good.*

Lila cried tears while issuing interjections of "What a tragedy! What a tragedy!" while she dabbed at her eyes behind her elaborate veil. She looked damned fine in all that black. So did Sissy and the icon bearers. Everybody was weeping except me and Coach Stock. Den sure had known a lot of women. The crowd was thick with sexy designer mourning wear. I stood there thinking about the hole I was paying for; it wasn't the money, it was the landfill going in it. Coach Stock had reminded me of football. On an option play two men run around end: the quarterback and another back; me and Den. If the quarterback is to be nailed by a defensive end or outside linebacker, the quarterback pitches to the back. If the back is going to get nailed, the quarterback keeps the ball. Den always pitched out when I was about to be nailed. I have always hated Denson Grooms.

That evil pitcher grew into a man that would have his sister suck his dick at the breakfast table; not only would he engage in sibling fellatio, but he would pass her around among his friends and convince her that it was a happy activity.

Lila told Sissy in the gentlest manner possible how things should have been. When the point came home, Sissy cried for three solid hours. Lila decided to bury the fucker for good, make it the penultimate symbol of The End. Lila wanted Sissy to have The End so she could have The New Beginning. I thought the idea of The New Beginning a good one. My checkbook is heavy. New Beginnings aren't usually for sale. I thought it would be worth the price. But the cost of having to stand listening to the respectful mumblings being spread over this dead asshole was making me physically ill.

Lila nudged me. It was time for my eulogy. Lila had prepared me a nice sorrow for dead brothers speech. I crumpled it and threw it at the flower-covered casket. Lila flashed daggers. Taking a stance behind the podium, I spit into the hole.

"Denson Grooms was the vilest excuse for a human being that I have ever had the displeasure to have known. I am very nearly ecstatic that he is dead. Few have deserved death more." I said it in a sweet tone, pausing to let it sink in. The dagger-eyes were turning into large caliber bullet-eyes.

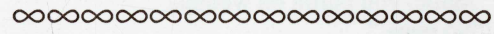
"Sissy, I regret that I am about to dog-talk your dead brother. A brother is a great loss, most times. If there is anyone here that *liked* the man; well, I am glad that the time in which you could have liked such a man is passed. He did not deserve to breath." Rocket eyes. Napalm eyes.

"Denson Grooms never gave one good damn about another human being in his entire pitiful life. He wasn't worth the tobacco spit he spread so freely about the ground he wasn't fit to walk on. Does anybody here know how many cases of date-rape Den indulged in. Does anybody know about the girl that I took to Atlanta for an abortion after Den was through with her? Does anybody know that me, she, and him were 17, he laughed when she asked for the money for the abortion? Does anybody know that the girl had the clap too? She wasn't the only one either. He was vindictive enough that he spread the clap to at least one other woman every time he contracted the shit. One entirely useless human being. And the things he did to his sister..." White hot nuclear bomb-eyes.

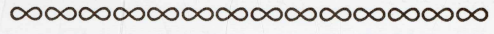
"That isn't important. Not at all! The man was such a wretched example of arrogant stupidity that even though he worked in a condom factory for ten years, he never once wore a rubber! I have heard the terrible shithead in that box say wearing a condom was like "trying to put a tiger in a Hefty bag." He cheated in industrial league softball. You all know how he liked to shoot at anything. There are some stupid people around, but Denson Grooms has a place in the Dumb Fuck Hall of Fame." Supernova galaxy destroying-eyes.

"There is nothing wrong with being a worker in a condom factory. Some of you here work there and I know you to be good men and women. But everyone of you know that the only way Den got that last promotion was because Arthur Dent died. The only reason Den kept the job before that was because of his Daddy. Official stupidity and lazy nepotism. Stupid and lazy, lazy and stupid. That was Den back and front. Lila, I know you brought us all here to lay this garbage to rest peaceably, and for him to be forgotten. But this kind of prick is too often forgotten. Laziness and stupidity besmirch what could be good about this world. Denson Grooms was shit. He is well dead. Shit like him needs a special remembering so that it can avoid being stepped in." Stepping out from the podium, I kicked the chock out from the pulley holding the main line of the ropes suspending Den's box over the hole. It fell a crash-tumble twelve feet and raised a dust cloud. I kicked the first dirt in the hole and stalked off toward the rented limo. Sissy was comforting Lila, whose tears were now real.

I sat in the limo looking out of the darkened glass watching Lila talk to the dissipating group of mourners. Sissy was shaking her head at her group of icon bearers. Lila half-marched to the limo as the last were leaving. Death-eyes. She opened the door and slid in beside me. She turned, met my eyes, reached and stroked my temple gently, and said "Gunther, sweetie, every single thing you said was true and probably needed saying, but it was a shitty thing to do. You peed on my parade." Then she leaned over, kissed my cheek, rubbed her cheek against mine, said "I love you," and leaned back. Then she cuffed me with all-out effort with the heal of her hand exploding into my temple. A move I had taught her. It was a good strike. My head was swimming in alternating shades of deep electric blue and blind white light. My temple stung like hell and I could feel it swelling. Why all the illicit nookie? How can you hate a dead man? What would The New Beginning be like? Lila has style. She did it exactly right. A lot of parades had been peed on lately.



Editor's Note: Each of the previous three selections, *And She Was, More on the ever Popular Art of Counting Foetal Poultry or How Did I get her?*, and *The End*, written by Winter Daniels has been included in its entirety. Although these stories stand alone in their own right, they are individual chapters from a larger work by Daniels.



This is Now
by
Paul Schattel

Then came the night when Old Jack MacDonald sat up in bed and noticed his wife was getting fatter.

Damn, look at her, he thought, *getting fat as a pig.*

The next day he was out on the spread under the hot sun, sweating to the growl of the tractor. He spit through his teeth and thought about his wife.

Have to make her cut down. Can't lay on top of no fatwoman.

But at lunch, when he went into the house, it struck him that it wasn't her body that was fatter, just her face. Her body was as trim as ever.

Face.

Nose is different. Ears, Jesus her ears.

Hair on em? Do they got hair on em?

That was when Old Jack MacDonald's daughter poked into the kitchen.

Mmm, Jamie, look at—

Face. Lookit her face.

Looks like a pig. She looks like a pig.

"Jamie, you puttin on weight?"

"No papa."

"Well. I ain't seen to good t'day."

Looks like a Goddamn pig.

"Jamie, I won't you t' turn right back around and take that shit offa your face. Makes you look like a Goddamn pig."

"Deddy please it makes me so proud of myself." She smiled a browntooth grin.

"Look girl, I'm serious," Old MacDonald said. "You take a look at yourself. Look like a Goddamn pig."

"Deddy..." whined Jamie, "...please."

Mother turned around from her dishes. Her nose was a snout. "You ain't no woman, Jack. Let her alone."

Old MacDonald could not say a word; he just stared.

When Mother came into the den to tell him dinner was ready, her ears had grown long and flat and sported large tufts of stiff black hairs.

"Mook mook mook. Mook. Mook," she snorted, shooing him into the other room. He sat down, powerless at his kitchen table.

"Mook," said Mother weakly, with a bowl of potato soup in her hands. "Mook." He took the bowl weakly.

Goddamn, he thought, *Goddamn.*

Jamie and Jimmy came in. Jamie had a pig head and so did Jimmy.

Old MacDonald dropped the bowl. Potato soup splatted onto the cornbread and the meatloaf.

They all stared.

"Mook, mook mook?" asked Jimmypig.

"What?" asked Jack. His eyes were as big as saucer-bowls.

"Mook mook mook mook." said Motherpig. "Mook mook."

"Uurrhhh," said Jack, looking everywhere but at his family.

The kids sat down as Motherpig got up to get a rag.

"Mook", said Jamiepig.

"What?"

"Mook. Mook."

"Mook? What the fuck is mook?" he asked nervously.

Motherpig stopped. Three pairs of pig eyes turned toward him.

"What is mook. Why do you look like that?"

The pigs stared.

"Stop it", he said, "Stop being pigs. Go back."

Eyes.

.....

Pig eyes.

"Mook?" asked Motherpig.

"MOOK MOOK MOOK!" yelled Jack, jumping in his seat. "FUCKING MOOK MOOK!"

The pigs stared, black-eyed and speechless.

And on his farm he had some pigs...

"Mook? Mook mook mook?" asked Motherpig. Her voice had thin red tremors running through it.

...eieio...

Motherpig slowly sat down at the table across from Jack and drew in a breath. Her hands were shaking. Quietly and hesitantly, she said, "Mook mook mook?"

Jack stared back. His lips trembled and his pink tongue darted out to comfort them. "Mook?" asked Jimmypig. There was a treble note of fear.

Jack dropped his eyes. Mother was silent.

This is now, this is now.

"Mook?"

He looked up.

"Mmmmm. Uh, hard day. 'm alright."

Eyes.

"I'm alright. I, uh, I just had a moment there. 's gone now. I'm okay."

I'm okay.

"Mook mook?" asked Motherpig.

"Yeah," he said, no idea what he was agreeing to. "I think I need some sleep."

He got up from the table, and the others stood with him. Jack looked at all their hands and they were human.

"Mook mook mook. Mook, mook," Motherpig said, and they other backed away to let him pass. They were afraid.

"Mook mook, mook mook," said Jimmypig, trying to be calm. "Mook mook."

Motherpig turned down the sheets while Jack went into the bathroom to be hysterical. His mind was white hot. He was humming a children's tune to himself. He opened the mirror cabinet for some pills to calm him down. He shook four out onto his palm and swallowed them dry.

When he closed the cabinet and saw what lay in the mirror, a mixture of terror and relief fell upon him like an anvil dropped from a high building.

"Jack?" Motherpig asked from beyond the bathroom door.